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THOU ART THE MAN

A Nobel



BY THE AUTHOR OF
"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & CO.
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THOU ART THE MAN.



CHAPTER I.

BEFORE THE CORONER.

DAYLIGHT, which solves many mysteries, brought to light the weapon that had slain Marie Arnold. The knife that killed her was found lying among the broad leaves of primrose and foxglove a few yards from the spot where she was murdered, and it was a knife which the keeper who had attended the two men in the salmon-fishing recognised as belonging to Brandon Mountford. He had seen him use it fifty times, he told the solicitor from Carlisle who was watching the case in Mountford's interest.

Convinced of Mountford's innocence, and

anxious to protect his guest, even in the midst of his own passionate grief, Sir Joseph had telegraphed to his solicitor that morning, and he had arrived at Ellerslie at noon, and had occupied himself for more than an hour in looking about him, and questioning the servants who had been concerned in the tragedy of the previous night.

The inquest was opened at the village inn at three o'clock in the afternoon, by which time everybody in the neighbourhood had heard the details of the murder, or had evolved from his or her inner consciousness details more striking and more elaborate than the actual facts of the case.

There was a general impression that Brandon Mountford was the murderer, and had been caught red-handed before he could withdraw the knife from his victim's heart; and there were conflicting theories as to the motive of the murder. The most popular hypothesis was that he had pursued her with dishonourable pro-

posals, and, finding himself scorned by her, had killed her in an access of blind fury—an act which he doubtless had repented as soon as the thing was done. That this quiet gentleman, who had won everybody's good word, was a concealed lunatic, was now the general idea; and Tom Dane, the stableman, was the first and principal witness. He described the finding of the body, and how Brandon Mountford had been discovered kneeling beside the corpse—his hands stained with blood, his countenance pale and agitated, his manner wild and incoherent.

“Had he any weapon in his hand?” asked the Coroner.

“No. His hands were empty.”

“Did you think it strange that there should be blood upon his hands?” asked Mr. Fangfoss, the solicitor. “Would it not seem to you natural that he should have touched the body in order to find out if there was life left in it—he being the first to make the discovery?”

“I didn't think about that, sir. I only

thought that Mr. Mountford's manner was very strange."

"Stranger than the occasion warranted?"

"Well, sir, I should hardly have looked to see a gentleman like Mr. Mountford—a gentleman who has travelled and roughed it among savages, I've heard say—struck all of a heap as he was when I found him—half like a man that had gone silly. I should have expected him to recover his equerbrillium sooner than he did. But there's others who saw him, and they can speak for themselves."

"What time was it when you found the body in the wood?"

"A little after ten—it might have been a quarter past. I heard the clock strike soon after I left the stables."

Hubert Urquhart was the next witness.

Asked if he had assisted in the search for the missing girl, he answered in the affirmative. The search had begun immediately after dinner, when it had been ascertained that neither

Miss Arnold nor Mr. Mountford was in the house. Mr. Mountford had been seen going out to the gardens at six o'clock, and had not been seen by anyone in the house after that hour.

"When was Miss Arnold last seen?"

"She was with Miss Higginson in the drawing-room at tea-time."

"That would be about five o'clock, I suppose?" suggested the Coroner.

"From half-past four to half-past five."

"Were you at tea with these young ladies yesterday?"

"No; I was by the river."

"What time did you go back to the house?"

"At half-past seven, or it may have been a quarter to eight."

"Is that your usual hour for returning?"

"I have no particular hour. I have been governed by circumstances—the weather, the sport, my own inclination."

"I take it you went back to the house later

than usual last night, Mr. Urquhart?" said Mr. Fangfoss.

He was a keen-looking man, thin, fair, with smooth, sandy hair, and a countenance that was little more than a profile. He had a quick, bird-like manner of turning his head to one side with an interrogative air, and nobody had ever been able to surprise his full face.

"Yes, I was later than I generally am."

"You generally took tea with the ladies before half-past five, I think?"

"Sometimes—not generally; but I don't think you need occupy the Coroner's time with these trivial details."

"Small details sometimes lead up to large facts. You went home by the wood, I believe?"

"Yes; I went by the shortest way from the river to the house."

"Did you hear nothing, or see nothing unusual on your way?"

"Nothing."

"Did you meet Miss Arnold?"

“ No.”

“ Nor Mr. Mountford ? ”

“ I met no one.”

“ Were you alone ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ How was it the keeper who usually attended upon you was not with you yesterday ? ” asked Mr. Fangfoss.

“ Simply because I dismissed him early in the afternoon, having no future need of his services.”

“ You did not want him to carry your tackle ? ”

“ No, my tackle is kept in a hut near the river. I had the keeper's boy with me at the river, ready to carry home my fish, if I caught any ; but as I caught none the boy wasn't wanted.”

“ Oh, you had no luck with your rod yesterday, though you were fishing later than usual ? ”

“ None.”

“ When did the boy go home ? ”

“ At the same time I did, I suppose ; but as his way was not my way I can’t answer for the fact.”

“ And you met no one—you saw nothing, heard nothing in the wood ? ”

“ I have answered that question already to his Honour.”

“ I’m sure you won’t mind answering it over again, to oblige me,” said Mr. Fangfoss, with his chirpy little air, and an insinuating slant of his sandy head.

“ I do not object, but I repeat that you are wasting time. I heard nothing. I saw nothing but the trunks of the firs, and the pathway by which I walked. I met no one.”

This closed Mr. Urquhart’s evidence. The room was crowded and the day was warm, and the witness looked heated and weary as he sat down. He gave a little start on glancing across the crowd, for among the spectators he saw the last person he expected to see in that room.

Sibyl Higginson stood in the background, wedged among the villagers, and looking over the shoulder of the short, stout mistress of the inn where the inquest was being held. She was dressed in black, and wore a hat which shaded and almost concealed her face, but he could see that she was very pale. Why had she come there? Her presence betrayed an intense interest in Mountford's fate.

The man who found the knife in the wood testified to the fact of finding it, and that he knew it to be Mountford's property.

"Mr. Mountford has no wish to dispute that fact, but he does not know how long the knife may have been out of his possession," said the lawyer. "It is some time, perhaps a week, since he used it."

"Can he say that it has been missing during that time?" asked the Coroner.

"He is not clear upon that point, but he can recall the last time of using it when he was in the boat."

The lawyer went on to argue that there was no evidence whatever against Brandon Mountford. He had been the first to discover that a murder had been committed, and he had been found, stupefied with horror at the deed, by the grooms who came to the spot with their lantern immediately after he made the discovery. To suppose that any man would be calm and collected in such a crisis would be to suppose that man wanting in natural feeling. The young lady had been known to him, and had been his companion in many pleasant hours. He had last seen her beautiful and happy, full of life and high spirits, and he found her lying alone in the darkness, foully murdered.

Would any man be perfectly calm and self-possessed and able to give a very clear account of himself under such conditions? Yet because this man had shown signs of agitation and distress he had been haled off to a village lock-up, and treated like a convicted criminal. Mr. Fangfoss ventured to say that he had never

heard of any more outrageous abuse of ignorant authority in the whole of his experience of the rural police.

There was much reason and much vigour in Mr. Fangfoss's harangue, but the fact of Mountford's absence from the house during the same hours in which Marie Arnold had been missing made an impression upon the jury which no arguments of the lawyer could weaken. That he had been found on the scene of the murder with blood-stained hands and blood-stained clothes was much; but that circumstance, startling as it was, could be more easily explained than the fact of his disappearance during the very time at which Marie had been missing, a disappearance which involved a complete departure from all his habits, and a marked breach of domestic etiquette. That a guest who until yesterday had been undeviating in punctuality, should keep everybody waiting dinner, and should offer no excuse for his absence, implied a state of things in which

passion had got the better of prudence, and had overthrown all the laws of a gentleman's existence.

The coroner had dined at Ellerslie more than once during Mr. Mountford's visit, and he knew him as a person of courteous manners and perfect consideration for others. To the coroner as well as to the jury his conduct on the previous evening seemed incompatible with innocence.

The verdict was wilful murder against Brandon Mountford.

The inquiry before the magistrate was to begin on the following day, and in the mean time Brandon Mountford was to remain in the lock-up, with every probability of being committed for trial after the magisterial inquiry. Mr. Fangfoss asked if bail would be taken. The answer was a decisive negative.

CHAPTER II.

ENCOMPASSED WITH DARKNESS.

It was night, and Brandon Mountford was sitting in the dismal old building by the sea, which had served as a prison-house for many generations of poachers, sheep-stealers, and smugglers; marauders and depredators, on land and water; rioters and insubordinates of every kind; had served as a prison-house in those bitter days when the criminal code was written in blood, and the full stop of every sentence was a hempen necklace. If the ghosts of all the men and women to whom those four bare walls had been the ante-chamber of the grave could have haunted the place, the air would have been thick with the spirits of wretched

creatures whose doom, looked at in the milder light of to-day, appears judicial murder.

It was what the sons of the soil called an "unked" place. The crumbling plaster on the bare walls was blotched with straggling stains and patches of damp, and all along the lower part of the walls there had crept a dull, slimy moss, like green rust, while the brick flooring was slippery with the same parasite growth. Cobwebs had thickened in every corner, and the spider had her fill of vagabond flies which came in at the grating when the place was empty, for the window was left open day and night.

The furniture consisted of a table and two chairs, large, heavy, and clumsily made, but which perhaps from their age might have been precious in the estimation of the collector. There was a wide old fireplace, with a grate half eaten away by rust, and which still contained the ashes of a fire kindled months ago. Dust and grime were upon everything,

neglect and decay were in the very atmosphere of the place, an all-pervading odour of dirt and smoke and mildew. Desolation and despair were in the sounds that came in at yonder rusty grating, the moaning of the barren sea, the shrill wail of the rising wind.

The custodian of this dog-kennel had been civil, for after all Mr. Mountford was a gentleman, and even if he were guilty and had to swing for it, he must have friends who would be likely to pay for any kindness shown him in his dark hour. With that conviction, Coxon, the village constable, had provided comfortable meals which the prisoner hardly tasted, had offered to light a fire, which the prisoner declined, had brought a newspaper and a pair of candles when evening closed in, and had sent a lad to Ellerslie for a change of linen and a supply of tobacco.

Brandon's pipe had been his only solace during those barren spaces of time before and after the inquest. He had not read a line

of the provincial newspaper which had been brought for his entertainment. He had sat and stared at the sky, and pondered gloomily—brooding upon the story of the past, recalling old impressions—but, most of all, recapitulating the history of the malady to which he was subject, as he had read it in the text books—a dismal and a harmful study to a man in his case.

The image of the Bavarian peasant had been with him in his solitude, the man in whom the impulse towards murder was so strong a tendency that with each fresh crisis of his malady the struggle to resist his own fierce longings had been harder, and with each recovery there had been in the patient's mind a wondering thankfulness at not having succumbed—at having got over the attack without satisfying the savage thirst for blood.

Brandon Mountford pondered the story of this unhappy being; a man whose boyhood and youth had been mild and inoffensive; in whose

warped nature the murderous instinct had only come with ripening manhood. He compared the Bavarian's history with his own. Till yesterday his paroxysms had been of a mild and normal character; but yesterday he had felt the gloom of an overwhelming despair, a burden too heavy to be borne, until, as he sank deeper and deeper into that dark gulf of despondency, it had seemed as if all the powers of hell were let loose in his brain. A rage, an agony, a revolt against Fate had taken possession of him. He thought of the girl who loved him and offered herself to him, and whom he dared not take to the heart that yearned for her—dared not because of the curse that was laid upon him.

He cried aloud in his anguish that the curse was devilish, not the chastisement of a just and merciful God, but the mocking torment of devils rejoicing in their power to make man's best gifts of no avail.

To-night in the still monotony of his shabby

prison-house, where the fitful candle-light played fantastic tricks with the stains and blotches on the wall, as the flame wavered with every gust from the sea, to-night he recalled the sufferings and sensations of yesterday evening, and his memory grew clearer with every hour of meditation and solitude.

All that he thought and felt before he fell headlong under the fir-trees was clearly recorded by memory, but the period of unconsciousness which succeeded was a blank. He might have been dead and in his grave for all he knew of those hours between the fall and the awakening. Anything might have happened to him; anything might have been done by him; but if that interval had not been inactive, if in that lapse of consciousness a new man had arisen within him and moved him to strange actions, there was no trace in his memory of the things that he had done. Never before had he experienced such a lapse of consciousness. His former seizures had been brief. This fit, with

its appalling duration, its long period of coma or dreamless sleep, was a new development of his disease.

The murder seemed motiveless, savage, the act of a maniac impelled by the lust of blood. Who else was there—who so likely as the wretched epileptic—to do such a deed of horror?

He remembered, shudderingly, that he had felt a growing dislike of Marie Arnold, resenting the way in which she had thrust herself between him and Sibyl, making all confidential talk impossible, and in some wise spoiling those delicious hours of innocent friendship.

Yes, he knew that he had disliked Sibyl's adopted sister, and that yesterday, on discovering the clue to her conduct, he had felt only a contemptuous wonder at her folly, only a careless scorn for a woman who could give her love unasked; when, if she had eyes or reason, she must know that the man she loved was devotedly attached to another.

He was startled from these gloomy thoughts

by the sound of voices outside his door. The key turned with a scrooping sound in the rusty lock, the door opened, and a tall slim figure in black came towards him, hat and veil hiding the face in the dim light. But for Brandon Mountford there was only one face on earth, and he was quick to recognise his visitor.

“Sibyl, my Sibyl, how adorable of you. My dearest girl, how shall I thank you?”

He would have taken her in his arms, but she held herself away from him. She laid her hand lightly on his breast, holding him at a distance, looking him full in the face.

“Brandon, I have come because I want to know the truth, to help you, if I can. I know that you are innocent. You never could have committed that awful crime—you of all men on earth. It is not possible.”

“One would hardly think so,” he answered, with a curious slow smile that frightened her.

“In my right senses I have no inclination to-

wards murder. I thought your friend a tiresome person, when she hung upon our footsteps and never allowed us five minutes' quiet talk from heart to heart. I used to think that rather hard, Sibyl; but that is scarcely a reason why I should murder her. No, my beloved, in my right senses—when I know what I am doing—I should be utterly incapable of such a crime—as incapable as your father, or you. But last night I was not in my right senses. A sullen rage against life and fate had seized me. I was in a fever of rebellion against the God who made me, and gave me a heart to love, a mind to revere all that is fairest and best in womankind, and then said to me, 'Thou shalt take no woman to thy heart, thou shalt live and die alone.' My senses grew dim in that red cloud of anger, and when I came out of that blood-red stupor, there had been a brutal murder done within a few yards of the spot where I found myself. Who knows, Sibyl?

How can I dare affirm that I was not the murderer? It was my own knife that did the deed."

"But had you that knife about you yesterday?"

"I think not. It is some days since I used it, but it may have been among the things in my room. I had been packing my fishing-tackle, and I had been absent-minded and pre-occupied all the morning. I did a good many stupid things in the course of my packing—put things into the portmanteau and took them out again, in a futile, muddle-brained way. My mind was full of you, Sibyl, and our parting—the parting that might be for ever. I might easily enough have put that knife in my pocket instead of putting it in the case with the tackle."

"Oh, you must not say these things—you must not say that it was possible—you must not think of yourself as a possible murderer. You cannot believe yourself capable of such a

crime—you cannot, unless you are utterly different from the man I have thought you—unless there can be two natures—two separate existences in one man,” argued Sibyl, despairingly.

Only now, perhaps, in this dark hour, had she realised the strength of her love—now, when she made herself one with him—when she felt and suffered as if his guilt, if he were guilty, was her guilt, a burden laid upon her as much as upon him—or as if this semblance of guilt—these accusing facts which encircled him—webbed and enmeshed her as well as him; as if this cloud of horror encompassed her too, and she must struggle through this darkness to the light of truth.

“Why do you say such things?” she pleaded, agonised by his silence. “You must know that you are innocent, that however the knife came to be there, near that poor murdered girl, you did not use it.”

“I know nothing—except that there was an

interval of darkness, a blank pause in my existence, of which my memory tells me nothing. How can I tell that I may not have done this thing, in that interval, prompted and urged by devils? You know how the tormentor—cast out of a human sufferer—drove the herd of swine headlong to their death. That may be taken to illustrate the epileptic tendency, the driving power of evil—the irresistible impulse towards some act of blind violence—the rending and tearing of the fiend within, the devilish instinct to which murder or self-destruction becomes a necessity.”

“But you have never felt this dreadful impulse—you have read of such things, and the thought of them may have haunted you—but these horrors have never come within your own experience. When you were in the wilderness, away from civilisation, almost beyond the reach of the law, were you ever wicked or cruel then, Brandon? Did you ever kill one of your fellow-creatures?”

She shuddered as she asked the question.

“No, Sibyl. I never lifted my hand against my fellow-man. I was not a hard taskmaster. I never had any inclination to be cruel. Those who knew me in Africa can tell you that our black comrades loved me as if I had been their brother and their king. No; the impulse to slay was never upon me—but once—when I had the fever, and thought in my delirium that I had two heads, and that all the throbbing agony was in one, and if I could shoot that I should be out of pain; my chum had as much as he could do to wrench the pistol from my hand before I could fire. I wanted to shoot that superfluous head which was causing me such agony. Yet I only knew this from the man who told me about it. I have no memory of my ravings, or of my attempted suicide. There sometimes are two natures, Sibyl, in the same man—the nature in calm and well-being—the nature in storm and madness. You are an angel of compassion and mercy, Sibyl. You

come into my solitude as a ray of light from Heaven—but you cannot help me, dear; and all you have to do henceforward, is to forget that there was ever such a man.”

“I shall never forget, and I will never believe that you were a murderer—even in delirium. It could not be.”

“There lies the mystery, Sibyl, the mystery of what can or cannot be in such a case as mine. You must leave me to my fate, my beloved—gallows or madhouse—or acquittal and liberty. Whatever may happen, you have only to forget me. There is a curse upon my life which no woman shall share. The nobler, the better, the truer the woman, so much the less would I link my life with hers. It was angelic of you to come here; and you must come and go as an angel, leaving no trace of your footsteps, only peace and consolation in my heart.”

He knelt down to kiss her hands, in a fond idolatry, and then becoming all at once calm

and practical, he questioned her as to her coming.

“I walked here. I had my maid with me. She is waiting at the inn. Coxon was very good. They all knew me about here, and would do anything for me. Not for my own sake, but because I am my father’s daughter. They all love and honour him.”

“He is a good man, and deserves to be loved. How does he take this trouble, Sibyl—this inexplicable horror?”

“He feels it terribly. I have hardly seen him since last night. He has been in his own room all day with the door locked. I begged him to let me in, to share his grief with me; but he would not even open his door to answer me. He told me—almost roughly—to go away and leave him to his sorrow. He was so fond of her—fonder of her even than I was, and yet God knows I loved her dearly, and that if I could for one instant believe that you killed her I could not bear to see you or be near you.

I might pity you, but your presence would be a horror to me. But I know that you had nothing to do with her death."

"Help me to find her murderer, then, that is the only thing you can do for me, Sibyl. Find the motive and the murderer, if you can. You know Marie Arnold's history, her friends, and enemies."

"She had no enemy. She was a kind, warm-hearted girl, and had never offended or injured anyone."

"She may have had some rejected lover. There is not much difference between a jealous lover and a madman. She may have been murdered in a paroxysm of despairing love."

"The only offer she ever rejected was from Mr. Tweedie, the curate, and one could not suspect him of madness and despair. Poor young man. He would not hurt a worm."

"One never knows the men who are capable of a destroying passion. But how did her murderer come by my clasp knife?"

“He may have stolen it, in order to fix you with the crime.”

“Not that kind of murderer. Passion is reckless and sudden in all its acts—not deliberate and designing.”

The creaking door opened again, and Coxon ushered in another visitor.

“Mr. Urquhart to see you, sir.”

“Sibyl!” exclaimed Urquhart. “What in Heaven’s name has brought you here?”

“My anxiety for a friend falsely accused of a dreadful crime. I am glad you are here, for that shows you sympathise with Mr. Mountford in his cruel position, and perhaps you can help me to save him.”

“I’m afraid it would need more than mortal power to do that,” answered Urquhart. “Nothing less than supernatural intervention seems likely to be of any use here. We want the angel who liberated Peter. With him, and a fast cutter in the offing below, we might do something.”

His cynical air, his scornful use of an example which to her was sacred, offended Sibyl. Yet she welcomed his presence, as that of someone who might be helpful to Brandon Mountford.

“You mean that he ought to try to escape—to run away, as if he were guilty?” she asked.

“Yes, if he is not in a position to prove his innocence—and upon my word I don’t see how he is to do it. Facts are uncommonly strong. The fact that you were missing at an unusual hour, for instance, Mountford—that you were found—as you were found——” he hesitated at this point, as if even for his hard nature there was agony in the thought of Marie Arnold’s death—“and the fact of your knife being the weapon used—your knife—stained to the hilt with—her heart’s blood.”

The words choked him ; he stopped suddenly—then with a frown and a shrug went on—

“It’s a ghastly business, Mountford. You must see for yourself how black it looks.”

“I see that as plainly as you, but I am not going to run away.”

“Ain’t you? Remember after to-night, unless to-morrow’s inquiry should be adjourned, you mayn’t have a chance of escape. From this place—with the people about here—you may get away as easily as Bazaine got away from St. Marguerite; but if the inquiry ends in your committal, and you are transferred to Carlisle, it will be all over with you, and you must stand the racket.”

“I mean to stand the racket. If I am guilty let me suffer. If I am innocent—well, I suppose Providence will watch my case, and the real facts of the murder will come to light, somehow.”

Urquhart stared at him in blank amazement.

“You talk of yourself as if you were not sure of yourself—as if you might have murdered her,” he exclaimed.

“I am not sure of myself, or of what happened during my lapse of consciousness

any more than an habitual sleep-walker can be sure that no strange thing has happened during his sleep. The fact that he can remember nothing is no proof that nothing has happened."

"No, no, I understand. You are right in that," said Urquhart, evidently impressed, "and this murder was so motiveless, so unnecessary; a girl whom no one could have hated—young, beautiful. Why should anyone murder her? It is a terrible case—terrible, for if you should be pardoned on the ground of lunacy, that would mean a life-long imprisonment. At Her Majesty's pleasure! Think what those words mean. A life, Mountford, a life! There are men pining in madhouses to-day who were shut up when the Queen was a young woman, when everything in this world was different from what it is to-day. Men who have never seen the world we live in; who would not recognise the cities they once knew or the places in which their boyhood was spent.

Men whose lives have rotted away within the walls of Hanwell or Colney Hatch."

"But if he is innocent, as I feel and know that he is—flight would be madness; it would be to stamp himself guilty."

"My dear Sibyl, that is a girl's heroic way of looking at things. I, as poor Mountford's friend, take a more prosaic view. All the chances are against him if he stay to stand his trial. Nobody can doubt that he will be committed for trial. On that point there can be no question. Between to-night and to-morrow morning there is the possibility of getting him away. It is only a possibility, mark you, and it will require sharp action on the part of his friends—you and me, for instance—and a lavish use of money; but it may be done. After to-morrow it may be impossible; it will be impossible if the inquiry finish to-morrow."

"You hear what he says, Brandon?" said Sibyl, appealingly, the tears streaming down

her pallid cheeks, her hands clasping Brandon's arm, as he stood motionless, seemingly unmoved by Urquhart's urgency.

"Yes, I hear him—but I will take my chance."

"No, no, you must escape; think what the danger is—death, or a life-long misery. Brandon, be rational, for my sake."

He looked down at her with a smile which transfigured him. "My angel, for your sake! What would I not do for your sake? But, dear love, between you and me there is a great gulf fixed. What does it matter where I live, or how I die? I must live or die apart from you."

"Brandon, for my sake! Don't trouble about the future. Providence may be kinder to us than you think, if we are true to each other. We will get you away from this place—out of England—if you will only be governed by us. We can do it, Mr. Urquhart. The people here will do anything for me——"

"And for hard cash," interjected Urquhart.

“All you have to do is to let us act for you. Everything must be done in a few hours. You won’t refuse to make the attempt, Brandon, for my sake, for my sake.”

She urged that one argument which a woman thinks infallible when she loves and knows herself beloved.

“Is there no risk for her in the attempt?” Brandon asked, turning to Urquhart.

“Not the slightest. Sir Joseph is a king in this place, and can do no wrong; and his daughter shares his immunity. The people will be blind, deaf, dumb, if she asks them—and pays them.”

“Sibyl, you shall be the ruler of my life. If you wish me to make my escape—although in the very attempt I stand self-condemned——”

“No, no, it will only give you time. Who knows if some new evidence may not be found, when you are far away. The murderer may confess; some clue may be discovered, some link in the chain of circumstances which no one

can foresee or imagine now. Only be guided by us, Brandon, and all will go well."

She spoke with confidence. Her look was full of hope as she clasped his hand at parting.

"Come along," said Urquhart, "there's no time to lose."

CHAPTER III.

“GRUDGED I SO MUCH TO DIE?”

“Now,” said Sibyl, when she and Urquhart were walking along the windblown path towards the inn where she had left her maid, “now, Mr. Urquhart, what is the first thing to be done?”

He was astonished at the firmness of her tone, the air of resolute courage in so young a girl; a girl who never before had been brought face to face with crime or danger; a girl who, in the circumstances, might have been forgiven had she abandoned herself to hysteria and distraction in her own room, instead of being here under the dark night sky, ready to dare anything for the man she loved.

“You must be very fond of him,” he said, grudgingly, “or you would never have come to this place to-night.”

“I am very fond of him, and I no more believe that he killed poor Marie”—with a stifled sob—“than that I was walking in my sleep in the wood, and that this hand of mine killed her. There was someone else—someone who will be found and brought to justice in God’s own good time.”

“Perhaps ; but God’s own time may be soon enough to prove His omnipotence, yet not to save an innocent man’s neck.”

“I did not think you would care so much for him as to trouble yourself what became of him. I am sorry for having been so mistaken in you, Mr. Urquhart. I thought you hard and worldly, caring for no one but yourself ; but the hour of trouble has shown the best side of your nature.”

“Oh, one can’t help feeling sorry for a fellow in such a fix as that. What you and I are

going to do may be a risky thing ; but if we can get him off safely—well, it will be a life saved, most likely ; for I don’t think the verdict would be anything less than wilful murder. You and I may know that if he did the thing he did it in an interval of aberration ; but there is no evidence to show that he was ever out of his mind, and the theory would hardly hold good with a jury, or even with the Home Secretary afterwards.”

“Nothing would ever make me believe him guilty.”

“ Ah, that’s a woman’s way of looking at the matter. You love him ; ergo he can do no wrong. Even in a moment of lunacy there would be a special providence to keep him straight. Another man—as good a man—might give way to an irresistible impulse of jealousy and anger—the impulse to destroy the creature he loved best in the world, perhaps. Such things have been. But no such thing could happen to your lover.”

There was an offensive tone in that last word which passed by Sibyl like the idle wind. She had neither thought nor care for Mr. Urquhart's opinion of her conduct. She thought of him only as she might have thought of a paid servant who promised to be useful in a dire extremity.

The road along which they were walking skirted the face of the cliff, and ascended towards the village, which was a little way inland, and on higher ground than the coast-guard station and lock-up—a long straggling village of pitmen's houses, with an inn at each end and a rustic shop here and there. The houses were better built than most pitmen's houses, and the village boasted a workmen's club and reading room, and an infirmary, while about half a mile off, in a rustic lane, backed by the woods which joined Ellerslie, an old grey stone manor house had been fitted up as a convalescent home, where the pitmen and their wives and children were provided with rest and

care after any serious illness or any accident of their trade.

The lock-up was away from everything except the coastguard, and the constable's cottage close by. It had no doubt been found that with the coastguard on one side and the constable on the other, this village gaol was tolerably secure as a temporary place of durance.

“Tell me what we have to do?” Sibyl said, presently.

“We have to get your friend clear away before daylight. I have been thinking it out since we left him. The only thing to be done is to get him on board a fishing smack which will land him somewhere along the coast, the farther from here the better. When he is on board her he can change his clothes for a spare suit of the fisherman's which can be ready for him, and his own things can be stowed away or thrown overboard. When he sets foot on land again he must appear as a rough sea-going man, whom no one will

think of identifying with the missing gentleman from Ellerslie. What you have to do is to get as much ready cash as you can scrape together—not less than two hundred pounds—and bring it to me as soon as you possibly can. I shall wait for you and the money at the Fisherman's Rest—the inn at the other end of the village—not the Higginson Arms, where you left your maid. And while you are getting the money I shall be making my bargain with the men who are to find the boat, and trying to secure Coxon, the constable."

"I have my own account at the Carlisle Bank. My father opened an account for me on my last birthday. I can write any cheques you want."

"Cheques are no use. The men wouldn't look at a cheque—least of all Coxon, whose conscience will have to be bought. You must get me gold or notes."

"It will be difficult. I could only get them from father."

"Then you must appeal to your father. This is a matter of life and death, remember, and we have only three or four hours. When to-night is gone our chance will be gone."

"I know, I know. Yes, it must be done. My father must help me."

They parted on the threshold of the Higginson Arms, commonly spoken of as the Arms, a house with certain pretensions, and which had been known to accommodate an occasional tourist — a low, stone house, with a parlour that was the pride of the landlady's heart, and whose chief ornament was a monstrous and stony-looking stuffed salmon, in a glass case. Here, in contemplation of a round table, furnished with a large assortment of pious literature, sat Miss Higginson's maid, Ferriby, yawning dismally.

She started up at her mistress' entrance.

"Lor, Miss, I thought you was never coming back," said Ferriby, who had been promoted from the village school to attendance on

Sir Joseph's daughter. "It's past eleven o'clock."

"I can't help that, Ferriby. We must make haste home now; come along."

Not a word said Miss Higginson to her maid during the hurried walk through a lane and across a field, to a gate which opened into Ellerslie Park. It was a long and lonely walk under a darkly threatening sky, and Ferriby, with the vivid remembrance of last night's horror, felt as if the air were thick with ghosts.

They heard the stable clock striking twelve before they came to the side door near Sibyl's rooms, the key of which door was in Ferriby's pocket.

"It will be daylight at four," thought Sibyl, "only four hours."

She was glad to see the lighted windows of her father's study, and to know that either he or Andrew Orlebar was still up.

"Shall I get you some lemonade and a

biscuit before you go to bed, Miss?” asked the maid. “You must be dreadfully tired after that long walk.”

“Nonsense, Ferriby, you know I think nothing of such a walk. I don’t want anything, and I’m not going to bed just yet. But you can go as soon as you like. I shan’t want you any more to-night.”

“Not to brush your hair, Miss? I should like to give your hair a good brushing. It might be a relief to your poor head.”

“No, no. There is nothing amiss with my head.”

“Oh, Miss, I don’t believe there can be a head in this house as doesn’t ache—after what we all went through last night,” and Ferriby burst into tears.

“Go, go,” cried Sibyl, imperiously. “Do you think tears can do any good?”

“They can’t bring her back,” whimpered Ferriby; “but they ease an aching ’eart. Let me take your ’at and scarf, Miss, at least.”

“No. Haven’t I told you to go to bed? Don’t worry me.”

Ferriby, upon being thus cruelly snubbed, went sobbing upstairs. She was a year or so older than Sibyl, who had taught her in the Sunday School, and whom she adored. This was the first time her young mistress had spoken so unkindly.

“Who can wonder at it?” whimpered Ferriby, “we’re all of us un’inged.”

Sibyl went to her father’s door, and found it locked as it had been earlier in the evening. Sir Joseph had been in that room all day, so far as Sibyl knew. There had been no family meeting at dinner. Mr. Urquhart had sat at table alone under the searching eyes of butler and footmen, and had eaten according to those attendants about as much of each course as would lie on a shilling, and yet he looked cool enough, and hardly a bit cut up, said the butler.

Grief in the servants' hall was more demonstrative, but did not show itself in loss of appetite.

"Father, I want to speak to you. Pray let me in. It is about something very urgent."

She heard her father's footsteps across the room, with a heavier tread than usual. He unlocked the door, and she went in, and father and daughter stood for a few moments looking at each other in the lamplight.

Sir Joseph's eyelids were red and swollen, his swarthy skin was deadly pale, and his whole aspect bore the marks of a complete abandonment to grief. Sibyl put her arms round his neck, and kissed him with compassionate love.

"Dear father, I am so sorry for your grief. I know how dearly you loved her."

"Not so dearly as I ought to have loved her, Sibyl. I made her a dependent in my house—only a humble dependent. That is a

bitter thought, Sibyl, now she is gone—gone from us by such a cruel fate. My God, my God ! ”

His hands clutched distractedly at his hair, he sank down into the chair where he had been sitting when Sibyl came to the door, and the iron-grey head was bowed over the table, amongst the scattered papers which his trembling hands had tossed here and there in the vain pretence of attending to the day's business.

“ Dear father, you denied her nothing ; she was like my sister. You can have nothing to regret in your conduct to her. You were all goodness—— ”

“ You don't know, child. Don't talk to me about her. It hurts me to hear you talk of her. The blow has fallen, and I must bear it.”

“ Father, I want you to answer one question. Do you believe that Brandon Mountford murdered her ? ”

“ No, I do not—no, in spite of the damning evidence against him. No, for a man of his

character and his lineage, my dear wife's race—such a deed must be impossible. I cannot believe him guilty, though every circumstance points to guilt. No, I believe she was sacrificed to the malignity of some ruffian who had a grudge against me.”

“Against you, father? Why, all your men adore you.”

“No, Sibyl. There are always black sheep. However popular an employer may be, he is never without enemies. If I have been a good master to good servants, I have been hard as iron in my dealings with bad subjects. I have made examples when they were needed. I should never have held my own with that rough lot if I had been afraid of letting 'em have it hot when they tried to get the upper hand. It's likely enough that some vindictive devil struck at me, through her, through my poor, innocent girl. Thank God for one thing, there were no signs of a struggle. The villain's knife took her by surprise. Three swift blows from the savage hand—no struggle,

no time for terror and agony. Death, sudden death—only death.”

The large, muscular hands were strained across his eyes, and the stooping shoulders were shaken by the violence of his sobs.

“My poor girl; caught like a lamb in the clutch of a tiger—but it was death, swift and sudden. It might have been worse.”

Sibyl knelt by his chair, clinging to him, leaning her head against his arm, trying to comfort him by mute sympathy, a love that needed no words.

When the storm was over he looked down at her kindly, but with a far-off look, as if he hardly realised her identity.

“You wanted something,” he said. “What was it?”

“I want you to give me some money, father; a good deal—at least two hundred pounds, in cash. I can give you my cheque for the full amount. I have drawn very little of the five hundred pounds you paid into the bank for me

on my birthday—but I must have two hundred pounds to-night, in notes or gold."

Her father looked at her wonderingly, but with the look of a man whose troubled brain is only dimly impressed by any circumstance outside the point upon which all his thoughts are centred.

"I don't understand what you can want with so much money," he said. "Is it for someone in distress?"

"Yes, for someone in great distress."

"Surely to-morrow would be time enough?"

"No, no, it must be to-night."

"How impulsive you are—just like your poor mother. There is some money in that drawer—the drawer with the key in it—some notes that were brought me this morning. Nearly three hundred pounds; some of my March rents. Take what you want, and go. I am better alone. This muddled head of mine can't stand the strain of talking to anyone—not even to you."

He rose and walked up and down the room, while Sibyl knelt in front of his writing table and opened the money drawer. The notes were of various denominations, and it took her some minutes to make up the sum she required ; and then she went to her father, kissed him silently, and left him with a murmured good night.

She met his faithful secretary creeping out of the billiard-room, where there was a solitary lamp burning.

“You will look after my poor father, won’t you, Mr. Orlebar? He is in a sad state of mind.”

“Yes, I am waiting for him. I hope I shall get him to bed presently. He was up all last night. It is killing work for a man of his age. I wish you could stay with him, Miss Higginson. You might help to persuade him to take some rest.”

“No, no, he doesn’t want me,” Sibyl answered hurriedly, as she went towards the lobby that opened to the garden.

She had not taken off her hat or jacket. Andrew Orlebar looked after her wonderingly, as she vanished in the darkness of the corridor. That she should be leaving her father when her presence might have been useful to him was strange in so affectionate a daughter. That she should be dressed for walking at that hour of the night was even more surprising. While he stood thinking over her conduct he heard the lobby door shut, blown to by the wind which was just beginning to rise.

The door had slipped out of Sibyl's hand while she was trying to shut it noiselessly. The sky was moonless and starless, and there was a fine, drizzling rain falling, scarcely more perceptible than dew, and it was not till she was near the end of her journey that Sibyl knew the penetrating capacity of that fine rain, but by that time her thin cloth jacket was wet through.

There was a light burning in a lower window at the Fisherman's Rest, but the door was

shut, and Sibyl stood for a few moments wondering whether she ought to knock, when she saw a bright red spot travelling towards her along the dark road, which proved to be the lighted end of Urquhart's cigar.

"You have been very quick," he said as he came to her. "Have you got the money?"

"Yes, two hundred pounds in notes—twenties, tens, fives," answered Sibyl, handing him the packet.

"Capital. You are a brave girl, and you may congratulate yourself in the days to come upon having saved Mountford's life. I have made my bargain with three of the best men in the village. They have a good boat, and they will be able to land him wherever he likes between here and Bowness. They will be ready to start before daybreak. One of them will be waiting on the beach with a dinghy. I have made everything square with Coxon. It wasn't an easy business, and he is to have fifty pounds—an exorbitant price for giving

the key of the door and being deaf and dumb till to-morrow morning. He has lent me the axe with which he chops his wood, and when Mountford is off I am to slip the key under the door of his cottage, where I can find it in the morning, and I am to knock the door of the lock-up about, smash the lock, and so on, so as to give the idea of an escape by violence; and now I'll take you to Mountford, and it will be your business to get him off quietly, and without any Quixotic nonsense on his part, while I look after the men. Stay, you had better take him a couple of ten-pound notes. He may be without money, and you'll have to arrange with him where his goods and chattels are to be sent. You can do anything with him, you see. You will succeed where I might fail. Remember, it is a question of life or death—”

“Yes, yes, I know, and yet I may be doing him the cruelest wrong in urging him to escape. All the world will say he is guilty.”

“All the world will think very little about him when once he has dropped through. In a case of this kind interest and curiosity soon die if they are not fed with daily scraps in the newspapers. When Mountford has vanished, and the funeral is over, this tragedy will be as if it had never been. Here we are at his door. Now, Sibyl, I leave you to manage him. When the men are ready I’ll come and fetch him.”

He unlocked the door and left Sibyl to go in alone.

Brandon was sitting at the table, in the dim light of the smoky candles, his watch lying in front of him, as if he had been counting the minutes in the weariness of waiting. He started up as she entered, and clasped her hand, and lifted it to his lips.

“My darling, why are you about at such an hour? To think that you should care for me so much—that you should be here in this wretched hole; you—in the dead of the night—

caring and thinking for me—robbed of sleep and rest and comfort for me.”

“I shall be better able to rest when I know you are safe, Brandon. I offered you my love yesterday. Do you think I offered myself lightly to a man I cared about so little that I could stop at home idle and content while he was in sorrow and danger. No, you could not think so badly of me. You know that whatever a woman can do I will do—bar the door with my right arm, like Kate Barlass, to keep out your enemies, if need were.”

She smiled at him through her tears—smiled with love so irresistible that he caught her in his arms and their lips met in a despairing kiss.

“My God,” he cried, “a man might live and die for one such moment as this. I am content, Sibyl. No matter where I go, or what becomes of me—however I may be tossed about in the tempest of life—cast on whatever strand—I must still remember—still take comfort from the memory that you have loved me.”

“And shall always love you, whatever may become of me. But now be reasonable, cool, clear-headed. And first take this money,” giving him the two notes.

“What for?”

“Because you may be wandering about for some time before you can get at your own money. And you may not have much about you.”

“The change of a ten-pound cheque, of which I have given a sovereign to my gaoler.”

“Mr. Urquhart was right, then, as to your wanting money?”

“Mr. Urquhart is very thoughtful. I don’t understand why he should take so much trouble about me.”

“It is surely common humanity in him. You and he have been companions and friends since you came to Ellerslie.”

“Companions, yes. I don’t know much about friendship. Mr. Urquhart has always impressed me with the idea that he has only

one friend in the world—the friend who goes under his own hat."

"You have been unjust to him. Trouble brings out a man's better nature. He has been intensely in earnest about you—most energetic in helping you."

"Yes; but why, Sibyl, why?"

"Brandon, are you a cynic? I know he is, but I did not think you were an unbeliever in other people's goodness."

"An unbeliever, when Providence has sent an angel across my pathway? No, no, no, Sibyl. I believe there are stray spirits from Heaven who are allowed to visit this dull earth now and then, in the shape of women like you. But I don't believe in the friendship of Hubert Urquhart. Is it his money you have given me?"

"No, no, it is mine."

"I am glad of that."

She told him about the boat, and that all he had to do was to wait quietly till Urquhart

summoned him. The interval was not likely to be long.

They waited longer than Sibyl had anticipated, waited with the rude wooden shutters open to the night sky, which was covered with ragged black clouds that foretold windy weather. The wind had been rising since midnight, and it had blown away the soft imperceptible rain, and seemed to be blowing the stars about—only a few stars scattered wide apart in the dark canopy.

“I’m afraid you’ll have rough weather,” Sibyl said, as she listened to the sobbing swell of the waves on the beach, below, and the shrill note of the wind.

“No, no, it won’t be much, or if it were I have not far to go. I can be landed at the first sheltered spot; the boat I am to sail in can hug the shore. No doubt the men know every inch of the coast between here and Bowness. They can land me where they like, and as soon as they like.”

"Not too near here; remember everyone will know you are gone to-morrow morning. You will be hunted for."

"Yes, like a hunted animal. A position of that kind does not enhance a man's sense of personal dignity. I am to wear another man's clothes, to sneak about pretending to be something that I am not. I must try to talk like a Cumberland fisherman, and must inevitably be found out. My speech will betray me."

He was walking up and down excitedly, with suppressed impatience. He had promised to do this thing, but he hated himself for doing it. He had, as it were, given his life into Sibyl's keeping, but he could but feel he was something less than a true man in allowing a woman to dispose of his fate. He could but feel that the manlier course would have been to abide the issue of things, to wait for the worst that the world's injustice could do to him.

Or if he were in very truth a murderer, were

it not better to let the law deal with him? What joy or peace could he ever know upon earth while he was unconvinced upon that point, while in his own mind it was an open question whether he had killed the girl.

There was but briefest speech during that long hour of waiting. Brandon paced up and down in moody silence. All had been said that words could say between those two. The story of hopeless love had been told.

Sibyl stood by the open window watching those rainy clouds, amidst which the rare stars glimmered. A sky of evil omen it seemed to her sad eyes. The dark, ragged clouds grouped themselves into a funeral train, and she shuddered as she thought of the dismal procession which was to leave Ellerslie early in the coming week. The first funeral which would leave those doors since her mother's death had taught her the inevitable end of all things human. Inevitable, yes, but not like this—not as it had come to her adopted sister.

“Poor Marie,” she thought. “I am so selfish in my sorrow for the man I love that I have no time to grieve for her. Grief will come by-and-by when he is safe—safe, but far away—and when I shall have nothing to think of but the friends that are lost.”

Brandon looked at his watch many times during that interval of waiting. Half-past two—the first hour gone—three, an hour and a half.

“Your friend is slow in making his plans,” he said presently. “I fear you may be missed at home. The whole household would run distracted if that were so.”

“No, there will be no one to miss me. I sent my maid to bed, and came out by the garden door, for which I have my own key. No one ever locks that door. We are not a nervous household at Ellerslie.”

Quick footsteps sounded outside, a key was turned in the door, and Urquhart looked in.

“Now,” he said, “all is ready. Look sharp.

It will be light in less than an hour. Come, Mountford."

Brandon paused on the threshold. Sibyl went to him and put her hand in his, simply, confidently.

"God keep you and comfort you," she said, "wherever you may go."

The words were low and fervent, and had all the earnestness of a prayer.

"My beloved, if I get clear out of the trap that fate has set for me, I shall owe you my life; but it will be only a broken life without you."

"Come along," said Urquhart, angrily. "Don't stand there exchanging pretty speeches when every minute adds to the danger."

He took hold of Brandon's arm and drew him across the threshold.

"I'll come back for you, Sibyl, when I've seen him safe on board."

"No, no, I shall go home alone. I want no one. You had better lock the door."

"No; stay where you are till I come back."

He shut the door quickly as he spoke, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

"For God's sake don't leave her there," said Brandon. "She'll be frightened in that dismal den."

"Not she. You don't know what a spirit that girl has. I shall be back in ten minutes. Come along; follow me down the path to the beach, and look out for squalls. The track is narrow and ragged, and a slip means death."

Sibyl was not frightened, but she was angry at being treated like a child, locked in that miserable room, with the burnt-down candles smoking and flickering on the dirty deal table, and the rusty grating between her and the outside world. Why should Urquhart have prevented her going back to Ellerslie alone, as she had come? She hated the idea of his company for the homeward walk. He would talk to her of Brandon, would discuss what had been done,

speculate upon his future, and to hear Hubert Urquhart talk of the man she loved would be hateful. He had been useful; he had done things that she could not have done, with all her ardent desire to rescue her lover. He had acted while she had talked. He had the strongest claim upon her gratitude, but she did not want his company to-night.

She walked across the room, and, looking towards the grating, she was startled by the apparition of a face—two faces—peering in at her.

“Who’s there?” she cried.

There was no answer, but she heard footsteps scuttling off in the loose shingle, and she felt assured that someone had been watching.

The thought was not a pleasant one. She knew not how long or how often those unknown faces had been there. Strange unfriendly eyes might have been peering in at her and Brandon, even in that one moment of abandonment, that kiss, which meant parting and despair.

She welcomed the turning of the key in the lock, and even Urquhart's company was better than her own vexed thoughts.

"Is he safe?" she asked.

"He is dancing gaily over the water, in the *Mary Jane*, with every thread of canvas straining in a favourable wind. He will be in Scotland before breakfast-time at Ellerslie, and it will be his own fault if he doesn't take the first steamer that will carry him across the sea, and so make a clean disappearance."

"There has been someone looking in at that grating," said Sibyl, pointing to the window, and then she described that brief vision of two inquisitive faces.

"I'm sorry for that!" Urquhart said, with a vexed air. "I'm sorry anyone in the village should know you were here."

Sibyl was outside the door by this time, and Urquhart was examining the lock, before beginning operations with the hatchet which he had brought with him.

“I don’t like the idea of being watched,” she said, “but as to their knowing I am here—I don’t think that matters.”

“Perhaps not, but your villager has an infernal long tongue, and you don’t want the whole neighbourhood magging about Miss Higginson and her interest in a possible murderer.”

“I will never admit that possibility; and I don’t care who knows I am interested in him.”

“You’re a plucky girl. Now, just take a look round before I smash this lock, and tell me if the coast is clear.”

He had taken off his coat, ready to begin work. Sibyl made a rapid circuit of lock-up and cottage, and came back to the door.

“All right?”

“All right!”

“Then here goes!”

He took a screw-driver from his pocket, and tried to get the screws out of the lock, but the lock was solid enough to have locked a fortress,

and the screws were embedded in rust. He could not move them.

"I thought as much," he said. "The door couldn't have opened without violence. Now for a few artistic touches."

He hacked and hewed the woodwork round the lock, sending the splinters flying, and smashing the worm-eaten panel, which sent out a cloud of dust and rottenness at every stroke. Five minutes' work made a ruin of door and jamb.

"That will clear Coxon's character," he said ;
"and now to get rid of my tools."

He ran to the little garden, behind Coxon's cottage, and disposed of the hatchet and screw-driver under a thicket of gooseberry bushes near the back door.

Sibyl had walked some little way along the cliff path by the time he overtook her.

"What a hurry you are in !" he said, as he rejoined her.

"There is nothing more to be done. You are sure he got off safely ? "

“I saw him on board the smack. If the wind holds as it is now he'll be far away north-east before noon.”

There were ragged streaks of a pale cold grey in the east, and the sea showed faintly livid under that first glimmer of dawn. It was not a sky of pleasant omen, and Sibyl, who had been reared on that coast and knew the signs of sea and sky, saw the menace of a storm. Her hope was that foul weather might be slow in coming, and that the man she loved might be safe on shore before the beginning of evil.

She had nothing to say to Urquhart in the walk back to Ellerslie, and she walked her fastest, partly because of that agitated state of mind in which it was impossible to walk slowly, partly in her desire to escape conversation; but at the door he stopped her, with his hand upon her arm.

“How you must love that man!” he said, as if the ejaculation were the result of his brooding thoughts during that silent walk.

“I do love him,” she answered, turning to look at him. “I am not ashamed of loving him. His father loved my mother before ever she saw my father’s face. Fate parted them. Fate is parting Brandon and me—but I love him, I love him as the best and truest man I have ever known—except my father—or am ever likely to know.”

“That sounds as if you had a bad opinion of my sex in general,” said Urquhart, with a sneering laugh.

“I don’t think you are all of you perfect—but I am not going to quarrel with you this morning, Mr. Urquhart, for you have done a kind and generous thing, and I am grateful.”

“You will have more reason to be when you find how general the belief in Mountford’s guilt is, and how strong the net which you and I have cut through.”

Sibyl went quietly up to her room, supposing that Urquhart would follow her example; but instead of going upstairs he waited till the

sound of her light footsteps had died away in the distance, and then he reopened the door by which they had entered, and went out again into the bleak morning, and away at a swinging pace towards the road that led to the railway station, distant a long three miles.

He looked at his watch as he went out of the shrubbery gate.

“Four o’clock. There is a train that will do for me at ten minutes to five.”

CHAPTER IV.

“WHAT LOVE WAS EVER AS DEEP AS A GRAVE?”

THE fatigue that Sibyl had gone through since nightfall had made no impression upon her physical being, or no impression of which her mind was conscious. If her limbs ached with the tramping to and fro and up and down over the rough ground by the cliff, she had no consciousness of her pain. Her mental suffering, her keen anxieties, her grief and horror at the deed that had been done, left no room in her consciousness for the sensation of bodily pain. She walked up and down her bedroom, and in and out to her balcony, in the light of a gloomy dawn, or stood looking at the sea and the sky.

A wild sky, a rough sea, a livid dawn that heralded a tempestuous day! And she had driven him out into the storm; she had urged him to act against his own judgment, which would have bidden him face his danger. Was it wise, was it well? Now that the act was irrevocable—now that the shattered door told its story of prison breaking and ignominious flight, she asked herself that question with maddening iteration.

Ignominious flight. Yes, that was the word. The man who flies from the face of Justice must needs submit to the ignominy that attaches to all flight. Innocence should stand firm, and wait the worst that Fate can do.

No doubt that was the idealist's view of the situation. But then came the thought of stern reality—the possible conviction—the possible gallows—the inscrutable perversity of Fate which sometimes dooms an innocent man to a disgraceful death, all for want of some little clue to thread that labyrinth of circumstantial

evidence, and get at the core of truth hidden somewhere in the midst of it. Guiltless men have been hanged, even in this enlightened age, and to the end of time there will always be that cruel possibility of innocence paying the penalty intended for guilt.

On the whole, therefore, Sibyl was thankful that she had helped to get Brandon Mountford out of the clutch of the law. For the time being he might suffer in honour and reputation by that escape, he might have to exist under a heavy cloud—an exile in some distant country, living under a false name, cut off from all the friends and associations of his youth. But in the years to come the clue to the mystery might be found, and the wrong might be righted.

"Who could have done it?" Sibyl asked herself, with her hands strained across her forehead, as if she wanted to wring some sudden inspiration out of her tired brain—"Who could have done it?" she asked, and

then told herself, despairingly, "I feel as if all my thinking power were gone. I can imagine no one who would do such a deed. Everybody liked her. She had no enemy. It could only have been some ruffian, with the wild beasts' thirst for blood—some madman.

"A madman, yes!" Sibyl turned sick with agony as she remembered what Brandon Mountford had told her about that inscrutable disease which can change sanity to madness, the sudden clouding over of the brain, the maniac's impulse towards evil.

"Oh, if it were he, after all. If my conviction of his innocence should be a mere delusion, born of my love for him! Well——," after a pause, "if it is so, I am the more thankful that he is free. My poor, afflicted love, marked out by Fate to bear so cruel a burden. Who would not help you to escape the bitter consequences?"

And then came a still more appalling thought. If he had done this thing; if his unconscious

hand had taken Marie Arnold's life, who could say whether this first crime might not be the beginning of a series of murders? The murderous impulse might recur, and this man—the man she admired and loved, the man of high birth and gentle breeding—might become a scourge and a horror to his fellow-men; a wretch whose death or whose lifelong imprisonment would be required for the safety of others.

She flung herself upon her bed, and hid her face from the daylight, awe-stricken at the horror her own thoughts had conjured up. The wind shrieked in the chimney, and there was something hideously human in the sound. One gust more violent than the rest seemed to shake even those solid walls.

There was a dreadful silence in the house next morning when Sibyl awoke from a sleep of sheer exhaustion. She was lying on the bed, still wearing the black gown in which she

had walked to and fro, with all the dust and chalk of the road and the cliff upon it, but careful hands had spread a down coverlet over her, and the morning cup of tea which she generally took at seven o'clock was on the little table by her bed, showing that the faithful Ferriby had been watching her slumbers. The window she had left open was shut, and the closed Venetians darkened the room. Sibyl sprang up from the bed, and ran to look at the clock on the mantelpiece.

A quarter to eleven. How long, how heavily she had slept—a dreamless sleep, unshadowed by any consciousness of the sorrow that made waking so terrible. The wind had been raging when she last looked at sky and sea. The sky was calm enough now, when she opened the shutters and looked seaward; a dull grey sky; but the waves were rising and falling with a slow and sullen force, and the livid patches of foam showed here and there upon the leaden-coloured expanse.

She rang her bell, and Ferriby came bustling in.

"Oh, how tired you must have been, miss—regular dead beat, to fall asleep in your clothes, and sleep from twelve o'clock to close upon eleven—all but twelve hours. You, too, such a light sleeper. I've got your bath ready; but let me fetch you a fresh cup of tea first. You can't drink that stuff," pointing to the neglected cup. "It's stone cold."

"Never mind the tea. Yes, I was very tired; my bones are still aching."

"And I don't wonder at it, miss. Dear, oh, dear, what times we're living in! Such a storm last night! We shall hear of ever so many boats lost before dark, Hampton says."

And then Ferriby related how Mr. Mountford had broken out of the lock-up in the midst of the storm, a proceeding to which she evidently attached an idea of Satanic power, as if he must have made his bargain with Zamiel or Mephistopheles; and how the hue and cry had been

raised, and the country was being searched far and near, and the telegraph wires at Ardliston Post Office were working as they had never worked before.

“And all I can say is I hope they won’t find him,” concluded Ferriby. “He was the nicest gentleman that ever came into this house—and if he did murder that poor young lady in a fit of madness—as they say he did—why, it was his affliction, and not his fault.”

“Who says that he murdered her?”

“Well, miss, everybody thinks he did it, and madness would be his only excuse. Not that there was anything like madness in his ways. Thomas, who always waited upon him, says there was never a politer, quieter gentleman. None of your swearing or flying out at a servant for nothing. He had rather a nervous manner sometimes, Thomas says—a little absent-minded—but never no violence—nothing that looked like being out of his mind.”

Poor Brandon! To be discussed and anato-

mised in the servants' hall—to have fallen so low—the talk of the village inn—hunted by policemen, his description telegraphed from place to place.

It was nearly one o'clock when Sibyl went downstairs, white as a ghost, in her black gown, and wandered aimlessly about the house, almost wondering not to see Marie's bright face in any of the rooms. This dread mystery of death was so difficult to realise, even now, after all she had suffered within the last day and a half. The horror of the murder was ever present in her mind, but she had not yet realised the actuality of death, the vanishing for ever of one familiar face, the eternal dumbness of the voice that had so lately been part of her home and of her life. Never more to see Marie Arnold—the companion of all her girlish years, the happy years in which there had been no shadow of care. Now life seemed all care, and dread, and difficulty.

It needed all her stoicism to visit the room where the dead girl was lying—that room now so quiet, and pure, and peaceful—yesterday defiled by the muddy boots of the coroner's jury, filled with ghoulish mutterings and whisperings. Not a trace of those rough visitors remained to-day. The white curtained bed rose pale in the dim light that crept through closely fastened Venetians, and the coverlet was almost hidden under white flowers—azalias, lilies, all the most precious blooms that the hothouses of Ellerslie could supply.

Sir Joseph's own trembling lips had given the order.

“Be sure there are plenty of flowers. She was so fond of flowers.”

“You'd like to see her, wouldn't you, miss?” asked Ferriby, when her mistress was dressed.

Like! No, it could not be a question of liking. Every nerve of Sibyl's being contracted with pain at the thought. Like, no. But it was her duty, perhaps—a duty she owed to the

dead, to stand for a little while by that placid form, which could never more rise up and hold out loving arms towards the adopted sister. It might seem cold-hearted, self-absorbed, to keep aloof from that awful room, where the great mystery offered its solemn question to Christian and philosopher alike.

After this, what? Or is this the end?

Ferriby's tone implied that her mistress ought to look upon the dead, and Sibyl wanted to do what was right. She wanted all the household to know how truly she had loved Marie Arnold.

She went to the door of the room—that room which she used to enter so gaily a dozen times a day—to show Marie this or that—books, flowers, finery—to ask questions, to tell little scraps of girlish news, to discuss an idea, any sudden fancy that had flashed into her brain.

Marie had been the only close companion of those impressionable years—the years which change the child into a woman.

An upper housemaid opened the door at Sibyl's light knock, and the cool darkness of the room, the perfume of lilies suggested a chapel in some southern land. Sibyl looked fearfully towards the white bed. Yes, there was that rigid outline under the snowy sheet. That which she had seen and shuddered at in painting and sculpture, but which her eyes had never looked upon till now in its terrible reality, for the father's thoughtful care had excluded the child from the room where her mother lay in that last sleep. Slowly, and with noiseless footsteps, she approached the bed, but when the housemaid put out her hand to raise the snowy lawn which lay so lightly over that marble form, Sibyl stopped her with a faint cry.

“No, no, no. Let me remember her as I knew her—not like this.”

She sank on her knees at the foot of the bed, covered her face with her hands, and thought a prayer—a prayer for the repose of that passionate soul—such a prayer as the Anglican

Church forbids, but which instinct prompts whenever the living look upon the dead. She prayed for the peace of the dead, and prayed still more fervently for that unhappy fugitive whose life was dishonoured by this untimely death, who, guilty or innocent, had to bear the shadow of crime. Her eyes were drowned in tears when she rose from her knees, and took one of those fairy-like blooms from the shower of lilies of the valley which had been scattered over the sheet, and with this poor little flower in her hand she stole softly from the room where the middle-aged housemaid sat by an open window reading her Bible by the flickering light that filtered through the Venetian shutters. For the housemaid, pious, middle-aged, and a confirmed spinster, there was a dismal relish in this quiet guardianship of the dead. To sit in a cool, flower-scented room, and read the Prophet Jeremiah in the spirit of unquestioning faith that seeketh not to understand what it readeth, was better than to overlook housework, and pry

into those dusty corners which the pert young pink-frocked housemaid is apt to neglect. The upper housemaid felt the importance of her charge, most of all when Sir Joseph sat sobbing beside the bed, as he had done in the dead of the night, when those passionate tears of his had startled the watcher from a profound slumber. She felt that she was being admitted to the family secrets, that her situation, always a good one, would be on a higher footing from this time forward.

The door closed upon the chamber of death, but scarcely had Sibyl crossed the threshold when she met Hubert Urquhart in the corridor, where, even in the dim light from shrouded windows, she could see how pale and worn he was.

“Are you going to look your last upon poor Marie?” she asked.

“No, no; I never look on the dead. I shouldn’t like to confess as much to a sportsman, but even the sight of a dead stag harrows

me. It suggests what I must come to, sooner or later. I was on my way to your boudoir.”

“You have news—of him?”

“Yes, there is news—of a sort. I want a few minutes’ quiet talk with you, Sibyl—I may call you by that name, may I not? All we went through together last night gives me a kind of claim, doesn’t it?”

“What does it matter?” she exclaimed, impatiently. “If you have anything to tell me, don’t keep it back. If it is bad news I would rather hear the worst at once.”

She looked as if she were going to faint, and he thought she would drop at his feet. He put his arm round her to steady her, and drew her gently towards an old-fashioned settee, under a large picture by Snyders, which represented the crisis in the life of a hunted boar, whose ultimate fate nobody had ever troubled to inquire into. Boar, hounds, landscape, had all mellowed to a dead level of brown varnish and blue mould.

“She thinks only of him ; cares only about him,” thought Urquhart, as he seated himself by Sibyl’s side, with his arm still supporting her.

It galled him to see that she took no more notice of his arm than if it had been her old nurse’s.

“You have bad news?” she said, agitatedly. “He has been followed—arrested?”

“Alas, if the worst has happened, it is even worse than that.”

“O God, O God, have mercy upon me! What could be worse—except his death?”

“Ah, Sibyl, that is the point. I am so sorry for you—so sorry that this man’s fate should have such power to afflict you. This man—a stranger here a few weeks ago——”

“Don’t talk like that,” she cried, imperiously. “I love him! That is enough for you to know. I am not ashamed of my love. What has happened to him? For God’s sake, speak.”

She clutched the lapel of his coat, looking at

him with wild, despairing eyes; startling him with the vehemence of her feelings.

“Can you bear to hear what I must say, if I have to tell you my worst fear?”

“I must bear it. Nothing can be worse than this torture.”

“My poor Sibyl! There was a gale last night, after the smack sailed—a gale from the south-west, blowing dead on our coast yonder. They were to put him ashore in the early morning, and to come back to Ardliston with the news that all was safe. I was down at the village an hour ago, and the men had not come back. There was no news of the *Mary Jane*.”

“They may have gone farther along the coast.”

“Hardly, with such a wind in their teeth. The storm was short and sharp, but murderous while it lasted. There is a feeling of apprehension in the village. I saw the skipper’s wife. She flew at me like a tigress—told me that if her husband and his boy were lost it

was my doing; it was my cursed money which had tempted him to take his boat out on such a night."

"What!" cried Sibyl; "was there any danger? Did you know that there was the risk of the boat being lost? Oh, if you did know that, what a wretch you are! Luring him to his death, under the pretence of saving him—over-persuading him, against his own reason—and I—I helped you!"

"This is sheer madness," said Urquhart, rising indignantly, and moving away from her. "If you take the thing in this spirit I can say no more. You knew as much about the night as I could know. You heard the wind rising, as I heard it. But neither you nor I could know that there was to be a squall after daylight. You knew what I knew of Mountford's peril, and that to stay where he was might mean a disgraceful death."

"And to escape a possibility he has flung away his life," said Sibyl, despairingly. "Well,

we have helped him to some purpose! If the boat is lost, and his life with it, you and I are his murderers!”

“It is folly to talk like this—absolute folly,” Urquhart answered savagely. “If he is drowned—well, it is a better death for a gentleman than being put out of this world by the common hangman. And, after all, he was nothing to you—not even your affianced husband—yet you have hazarded your good name for him, and now you are endangering your reason.”

She looked at him with a vacant expression, as if she hardly heard him, or heard without understanding.

“What is the woman’s name?” she asked.

“What woman?”

“The woman whose husband owned the boat that is lost?”

“Or that may be lost. There is nothing certain yet. The woman’s name is Kettering.”

“Where does she live?”

“In the lane at the back of the Fisherman’s Rest. What are you going to do?” as Sibyl went towards the staircase.

“I am going to Mrs. Kettering.”

“What madness! You will make yourself the talk of the village.”

“I am going to see Mrs. Kettering. The boat may have come back, perhaps. There may be good news for me at the village.”

“What will your father think?”

“He will not mind. He believes in Brandon’s innocence as firmly as I do.”

“He will change his mind, perhaps, when he hears that Brandon has run away,” muttered Urquhart, walking up and down the gallery after Sibyl had left him.

He did not pace that long gallery from end to end, but turned at about two-thirds of its length, giving a wide berth to the door at the east end, that door which closed Marie Arnold’s room.

Marie’s room! How soon it would cease to

belong to her—how soon that strong personality would have passed out of the daily life of Ellerslie House, leaving—to Urquhart’s mind at least—a blank which none could fill.

There was no good news in the little sea-coast village, not a whisper of hope to be heard in all the length and breadth of the long, straggling street. Sibyl found the little lane behind the Fisherman’s Rest—a lane of about a dozen stone cottages—full of sad faces and weeping women. The *Mary Jane*, with her crew of four, had gone to the bottom—all hands on board—and there was scarcely one of those rough stone cottages whose inmates were not weeping for kinsman or husband, sweetheart or friend. The intermarriages of the small seafaring community had interwoven the whole village in the ties of kindred. There could hardly be a death at Ardliston which would not justify all the inhabitants in putting on mourning, whence it arose that rusty black was the chief wear from

one end of the village to the other. Three family names prevailed along the straggling street, and if people were not Ketterings, they must needs be Hessles or Garforths — while Garforths, Hessles, and Ketterings were all allied by cousinship. Thus it was that lamentations for the loss of the *Mary Jane* filled the air in the narrow lane behind the Fisherman's Rest, and dishevelled women sat crying on the rugged stone steps leading up to cottage doors, while little groups clustered at the corners talking of the catastrophe, the fact of which no one doubted. Alas, there seemed no room for doubt, since fragments of the *Mary Jane* had been washed ashore near one of the most dangerous rocks on that iron-bound coast, and it was clear the ill-fated boat had been blown on to that rugged point—which the fishermen's wives all knew and had heard of as a devouring monster—and had been split into matchwood. Some among those old time-honoured boats in the little fisher fleet that sailed out so gaily from

Ardliston in fair weather, needed no gigantic forces of Nature to destroy them. The *Mary Jane* had been renowned as a swift sailer, and had come off with flying colours in many a fisherman's race at the annual regatta; but age will tell, and the *Mary Jane* was older than her owner had ever cared to remember.

Well, she had gone.

“She'd have lasted out our lives if my good man hadn't flown in the face of Providence to please them at the great house—them that should have known better,” sobbed the widow, sitting distractedly in the midst of a sympathising group, while her little children played in a corner of the room, and the latest baby—latest in a family where there seemed at least three babies—slept peacefully in the closet bed, a bed built into the wall, and capable of being enclosed with a sliding shutter.

The widow started to her feet at sight of Sibyl, and pushed back the loose hair that had fallen over her eyes with angry hands, almost

as if she would have plucked it out by the roots.

“Oh, it’s you, Miss Higginson,” she cried. “I wonder you’ve got the cheek to come and look at me and my childer—you that have made those babies orphans, and me a desolate, miserable woman—all along of trying to save your sweetheart’s life. His life! What was his life worth agen my ‘poor Jack’s—Jack as had wife and childer to work for—Jack as never did wrong to man or beast in his life—drownded trying to save your sweetheart—a murderer—that ought to have been hung? Oh, it’s wicked, that’s what it is. God Almighty didn’t ought to let such things be. He didn’t ought—but there, the world’s too full of people now for God Almighty to care as He did for the Israelites, when there was only a sprinkling over the face of the earth. It’s a wicked world—and you’re a wicked girl, Sibyl Higginson, to have tempted my Jack to risk his life for the sake of your cursed money.”

“Come, come, Mrs. Kettering,” urged a motherly voice, “you’ve no call to fly at Miss Higginson, who’s always been your true friend.”

“My true friend, yes, till last night; but my bitter enemy for ever and ever after last night.”

“Now, Susan, you know you was all in favour of Jack’s taking the job. He told you there’d be dirty weather, but you were all for making the best of it. You was, now; you must remember that.”

Susan Kettering threw up her arms and beat her careworn forehead with her clenched fists.

“Remember, oh, God! I remember. It was to earn bread for the bairns. It was to earn more than two years’ rent. What mother wouldn’t have been eager to earn five and twenty pound by one night’s work? Oh, God! oh, God! what a black and bitter night’s work for me and mine! And it was your doing, Miss Higginson; it was all your doing.”

“Susan Kettering!” remonstrated the woman

who had spoken before, "you mustn't go on like this. There ain't no justice in it."

"Oh, let her talk," said Sibyl, standing on the threshold, leaning against the door post, with white face and dry, haggard eyes, "let her talk, poor soul. But is it quite certain that the boat has gone down?" she asked, appealing to the women generally. "Is there no hope?"

"No, miss, there ain't no hope—there's been enough rotten timber washed ashore to show that the *Mary Jane* was mashed up in that heavy sea. But it's no fault o' yourn, Miss Higginson, and if Susan weren't mad with grief she'd never say such things."

"No hope!" murmured Sibyl, with quivering lips.

No hope for the grief-stricken wife and these fatherless children—but what of him for whom that fated boat had put out to sea? He might have been landed safely before that evil hour in which the *Mary Jane* was blown upon the rocks. All was uncertain yet as to his fate;

and her pity for this mourner with the blood-shot eyes and wild hair and distracted movements of clenched hands and writhing arms was made keener by the thought that Brandon Mountford might be safe on shore.

"Was it far from here that the boat was wrecked?" she asked the elderly woman who had spoken last.

"Yes, Miss, half a dozen miles or more, if she went ashore where they all think she did—on the Hurraby rocks. It's a bad place, that is. There's been many a wreck there within the memory of the old people hereabouts."

"Six miles further north," mused Sibyl, "that would be near Allan Bay."

"Yes, Miss, this side the bay, a mile nearer home."

"And Allan Bay would have been a safe place to land anyone out of the boat?"

"Safe enough if they could have run along shore in such a wind—but the Lord knows if they could. It was a wicked wind."

“What time was the gale at its worst?”

“Between six and seven, Miss.”

Yes, she remembered looking at the clock on her mantelpiece while that howling and shrieking of the wind was loudest, when the Venetian shutters were rattling as if they would be torn from their fastenings, and the solid window frames were shaken, and the massive stone chimney seemed to vibrate and tremble above the roof.

Past six—and Brandon had gone on board the *Mary Jane* before three o'clock.

There would have been time to land him at Allan Bay, and more than time under any reasonable conditions of wind and sea—but who can reckon time when the frail boat has to fight every inch of progress—when all the forces of Nature are set against the frail cockleshell in which the low-born bread-winner tempts the sea.

Still there was hope—hope for her, though not two of the *Mary Jane's* rotten timbers still

held together. She bent over the weeping widow, gently touched the coarse dishevelled hair with delicate fingers, and gently stroked the burning forehead, rugged with the premature wrinkles that come of toil and care, hard weather and a hard life.

“I am deeply sorry for you, my poor friend, and you may be sure I will take care of you and these poor children always—always.”

“Sorry for me?” cried the widow, starting up, and pushing away the gentle hand, “who wants your sorrow? Who wants your care? Do you think I’d take another sixpence of your money—the money that bought my good man’s life. You and your father think money can buy anything. What are we but your slaves? And we go about saying how good you are—you that have got everything, while we have to toil for our daily bread, in the pit or on the sea—danger and darkness both—it don’t much matter which, there’s always Death waiting round the corner for us—while you sit at home

and take your ease, and think there's nothing on this earth that's too good for you. And now, to save your sweetheart—a madman and a murderer—my true-hearted husband has gone to the bottom of the sea—”

“Hush, now, Susan, you mustn't take on like this—it ain't fair,” remonstrated the elder woman, and there was a murmured chorus of remonstrance from the others.

“Don't mind her, Miss, she's right down daft,” said one. “It's a shame to go on at you, that has always been so good to us. She'll be sorry enough for what she has said when she comes to her right senses.”

“I shall be sorry for her all the days of my life,” Sibyl answered, sadly. “Let me speak to you a minute outside, Mrs. Garforth,” she added, in a lower voice, to the widow's elderly kinswoman.

Mrs. Garforth followed quickly to the door.

“Don't take any money from her,” screamed Susan Kettering. “Not one penny of her

cursed money. It's cost me my husband. Not a dirty penny—not—”

Her voice rose to a scream, and then there came a burst of hysterical laughter, as she flung herself violently on the bed, where the baby woke, looked about for a moment or two with scared eyes, and set up a piteous wail.

Two other babies took up the note, and squalled in sympathy, an infantile pandemonium.

“Oh, Miss, it's too bad of her,” said Mrs. Garforth, when she and Sibyl had walked a few paces along the lane and were out of hearing of the tempest inside the cottage, “but she ain't in her right mind. And you looking so ill, too,” she added, noting the girl's ashen cheeks and hollow eyes, “and such trouble up at the great house.”

“Yes, trouble has come upon us—terrible trouble. I never knew what it meant till now. I have never been half sorry enough for others.”

“Don't say that, Miss. You've always been

kind to us. None that was in trouble or sickness ever went to Ellerslie for help in vain. Poor Susan has no call to blame you for her loss. Jack was asked to undertake a risky job, and he was offered a good price for it—and he could say ‘Yes,’ or ‘No.’ She urged him to say ‘Yes,’ and that’s what makes her heart so sore, poor creature.”

“Did they think there was a risk—last night—before the boat went out?”

“Lor, yes, dear lady; them as know the coast knowed as there was a gale coming.”

“And he knew—Mr. Urquhart! He must have known.”

“Well, Miss, he’s a landsman, you see—though he’s bound to know the coast, seeing Killander Castle ain’t far off. But o’ course he wanted to get your sweetheart away—when a man’s in danger of bein’ tried for his life, and there’s only one road by which he can get away, folks can’t be too partikler about the weather along that ere road.”

“You mustn’t talk of Mr. Mountford as my sweetheart, Mrs. Garforth. He was nothing to me but a friend—a very dear friend.”

“What, wasn’t you and him keeping company, Miss?”

“No, no.”

“Ah, people hereabouts is good ’uns to talk. They’d all have it as you and him was sweethearts, and you was a’most out of your mind about him last night—like poor Susan to-day about her Jack, and that you was at the lock-up with him best part o’ the night. Martha Hessele said she and Susan saw you there parting with him, just afore he went off to the boat with Mr. Urquhart——”

“Let them talk,” Sibyl interrupted haughtily.. “This gentleman is a relation—we are distant cousins. I know he is innocent—know it by my own instinct, you understand—and my father believes in him as firmly as I do. I should have been a cowardly wretch if I had not helped Mr. Urquhart to get him out of

prison before more injustice was done. All I could do was to help with money—which my father gave me for that purpose. You can't suppose I care what these people think."

She was beginning to feel the sting of public ingratitude. She had been very kind to these people—though Ardliston lay beyond the immediate surroundings of her home. She had gone out of her way to be kind to them, and had thought herself beloved by them.

"I must go home," she said, drying the tears that stung her burning eyeballs every now and then, in spite of that proud spirit of hers, which made her strong to bear calamity. "I want to help Mrs. Kettering and her children as much as I can. Will you look after them for me, Mrs. Garforth, and see that they want for nothing? If you can come to Ellerslie Park this afternoon I'll give you some money to keep in hand for them, and I'll tell you what I want done in the future. If the father risked his life—and lost it—for my kinsman's sake, those

children ought to be my care till they are old enough to care for themselves.”

“ You’re a noble-hearted young lady ; and by-and-by, when she’s calmed down a bit, Susan will be as grateful to you as I am now for her sake.”

CHAPTER V.

“AH, BUT, FORGETTING ALL THINGS, SHALL
I THEE ?”

No trace of the fugitive had been discovered, though £50 reward had been offered for his arrest—only £50, offered by the Treasury. People in the neighbourhood of Ardliston thought it odd that Sir Joseph Higginson had offered no reward. Yet there would be naturally a restraining influence in the fact of family ties. If Marie Arnold was dear as an adopted daughter, her supposed murderer was allied to Sir Joseph by marriage, and he could hardly desire to see a kinsman of his late wife's in the criminal dock. The prevailing belief in Ardliston and at Ellerslie was that

the sea had closed over a lunatic murderer, and that this swift end of a terrible story was about the best thing that could have happened. Nobody outside Ellerslie Park had any doubt that Brandon Mountford had killed Marie Arnold, in a paroxysm of epileptic fury. The word epilepsy once having been uttered, the solution of the mystery was taken as found. The people who knew the least about that terrible disease and its influence on mind and conduct were the most boldly assertive as to the probabilities of the case, and there was no one in the neighbourhood of Ellerslie to suggest that in a criminal mystery the obvious is always the unlikely. There was a general assurance that the last word of the story had been told. The wretched assassin had been shuffled off the scene of this world, to his own and everybody else's advantage. Much suffering and disgrace had been spared to him, and much trouble and loss of time to other people. The sea and the wind had ac-

counted for a man whose continued existence must have been an affliction to himself and a burden to others.

The few county people within the influence of Ellerslie looked into their peerages, and descanted upon the lucky escape of the Allandales and Braemars, and all their kindred. The poor young man was so highly connected that to have had him tried for murder would have brought annoyance and discredit into half the drawing-rooms in Mayfair, and made dinner-table conversation even more full of pitfalls than it usually is. Those Mountford girls—Sibyl Higginson's aunts, and their sons and daughters, had married all over the peerage. There was hardly a family of rank that hadn't a Mountford in it. And how terrible an ordeal for that aristocratic clan had Brandon Mountford's trial for murder been in all the papers; the question of his lunacy or non-lunacy discussed in leaders and letters, fought over by medical specialists, clamoured about by

benevolent busybodies; until the mind of fashionable London became permeated with the idea that the Mountfords were everyone of them mad; to support which thesis stories would be raked up about every Mountford who had ever worn a queer hat or thrashed a valet from the time of Queen Elizabeth.

Much of this hateful publicity Mr. Mountford's clan had escaped. There had been a great deal of talk about the Ellerslie murder in that part of Cumberland; but the respect felt for Sir Joseph Higginson had exercised a restraining influence over the editors of local newspapers, and the pen of the picturesque reporter had been wielded under restrictions.

Upon the report of the inquest there had followed the startling news of Brandon Mountford's escape from gaol, and the probabilities as to his having got away from England, or perished with the luckless crew of the *Mary Jane*, were duly discussed; but after a paragraph or two in subsequent issues, the matter

had been allowed to drop, and the local Press had done nothing to annoy the good man to whom the proprietors of the two local weeklies had always looked for aid in times of financial difficulty.

But though the Press might renounce the privileges of the new journalism in the interests of an old friend, there were tongues in the neighbourhood, old womanish tongues, not always owned by old women, which would not forego so fair an opportunity to anatomise a millionaire's character, and breathe their venom on his daughter's fair name. And these tongues were busy, and these small gentry, dwelling in secluded places, afar from the burning questions of public life, were not to be deprived of their prey. In the whist club, on the tennis ground, and at many tea-tables, Brandon Mountford and Sibyl Higginson, and the murdered girl were the subject of low-voiced conversations, where the shrug, and the nod, and the half-expressed

thought went a great deal further than plain speech.

Sir Joseph Higginson let them talk, or knew not that they were talking. Marie Arnold was lying in her grave on the landward side of Ellerslie Church, screened from the bleak wind that blows up from Solway Firth, after one of those terrible funerals which are always awarded, Heaven knows why, to a murdered victim.

People had crowded to Ellerslie from busy towns and from far-off villages to follow the murdered girl to the churchyard, and to stare at her mourners, concentrating their attention upon Sir Joseph's haggard face and grey hair, and inclined to resent the absence of his fair young daughter, who should have been a feature in the show.

That hideous funeral, with the rabble to whom the horror of Marie's doom served as a zest to a pic-nic basket and an excuse for an outing, was over, had been over for nearly three months, during the greater part of which

time Sir Joseph and his daughter had been in Germany. He had fled from the scene of the murder directly after the funeral, and Sibyl had gone with him. For her, too, Ellerslie had become a place of bad dreams. The gardens and the wood she had loved so well were now steeped in a vague horror. She dared not even think of the spot where the body had been found, and where Brandon had been arrested, with blood-stained hands. Her maid, Ferriby, had insisted on describing the exact spot, had wanted to take her mistress there, with the tactlessness of her kind. It was an infinite relief to Sibyl to leave England, and she was grateful to her father for proposing to take her to Schwalbach as soon as Miss Minchin could be recalled from her holiday.

It was not so agreeable to her feelings to hear next morning that Hubert Urquhart was to be of the party. He had offered to go as a kind of gentleman courier, to take all trouble off Sir Joseph's hands.

“Your valet is English to the fortieth power, and will be very little use to you in any excursioning,” he said.

Sir Joseph protested that he was not going to excursionise. He was going to the quietest place he could find, just to get himself and Sibyl away from the home which had been made terrible for them. He wanted no one but his old servant, and good little Minchin to take care of Sibyl. They would live retired from the world, till the memory of that dreadful night had lost something of its haunting power, and they could venture home again.

“To stick in one spot and brood over the past is the way to remember and not to forget,” remonstrated Urquhart. “You and Sibyl will come back to Ellerslie in lower spirits than when you went away. Come, Sir Joseph, be reasonable. This shocking catastrophe has pulled you down. You’ll want a friend at your elbow.”

Sir Joseph was not in a condition to argue about anything. His brain felt dazed and dull.

He let Hubert Urquhart think and act for him, and Sibyl seeing him so broken down, aged in appearance by ten years, had not the heart to oppose his wishes, or even to tell him that Urquhart's company would be a burden to her. So they started for Schwalbach with Urquhart and Miss Minchin, and two servants, Sir Joseph's faithful valet of many years' service, and Sibyl's maid Ferriby, who was utterly incapable of looking after her young mistresses' luggage, and in constant peril of being left behind at railway stations, or losing herself in strange cities. Fortunately little Miss Minchin was equal to the occasion, and took care of mistress and maid. Her period of service was nearly at an end. This was perhaps the last journey she and her beloved pupil were to take together, the last time they were to be together as pupil and governess, and her affection was intensified by the prospect of parting.

"Whatever shall I do with myself without my darling girl?" she sighed.

“You’ll have other darling girls, Mousey dear ; better girls than me, perhaps.”

“No, dear, I shall have no more pupils. Your good, good father is going to allow me fifty pounds a year for the rest of my days, and I am going back to Beverley, to my dear old widowed mother, to be a help and a comfort to her in her declining years. There never was such a man as Sir Joseph, I think, since this world began.”

“He is all that is dear and good, but it isn’t a bit too much to do for you, dearest Minchin. Why, if it wasn’t for all the care you took of me, I should hardly be alive.”

She checked herself with a deep sigh, thinking how much heartache an early death might have saved her.

They stayed at Schwalbach, in spite of Mr. Urquhart’s remonstrances. Neither Sir Joseph nor his daughter were in spirits for touring. Neither mountain scenery nor mediæval architecture offered any attraction for them. The

minds of both were brooding on the past, and the thoughts of each were alike gloomy.

Day followed day in a dull monotony, week followed week, and still there was no sign from Brandon Mountford to show that he lived.

“If he landed, and left England for some foreign port, it is very cruel of him not to relieve my mind of this horrible uncertainty,” Sibyl said to Urquhart, on one of those rare occasions when she spoke to him confidentially.

“I have no belief in his escape. I believe he went down in the fishing boat with the rest of them; and be assured that if the sea closed over him Providence was kind to us all.”

“I don’t believe that he was drowned,” said Sibyl, obstinately. “He may have sailed for the Cape—and I shall hear from him by and by. No, I will not believe that he is dead.”

“My dear enthusiast! And to think that you had only known him three weeks.”

There was a covert sneer in the words and the tone, which passed unnoticed by Sibyl. She

attached no importance to this man's ideas or opinions. He had behaved well upon the whole during those long dull weeks at Schwalbach. He had been useful to Sir Joseph, useful and companionable, and for that Sibyl was grateful. She was still more grateful to him for not having forced his society upon herself. He had not waylaid her in her rambles with sturdy little Miss Minchin, or intruded on her quiet evenings of study in her own sitting-room. He had tried sometimes to lure her from her seclusion, and had been occasionally successful in organising a drive to some distant point of interest, but however picturesque the scenery, he could see that her thoughts and her heart were elsewhere. He had never succeeded in making her forget Brandon Mountford. Yet he did not despair of reaching that golden goal to which all his efforts, since Marie's dreadful death, had been tending.

“It's a waiting race,” he said to himself on that last night at Schwalbach, as he paced up

and down the hotel terrace in the soft grey interval between sunset and moonrise, "but the prize is such a glorious one! A man may well be patient, buoyed up by such a hope. A lovely woman in the very bloom of girlhood, and a dower of a million or two. Yes, it's a question of millions. Jabberwock, who writes the money article in the *Outside Broker*, told me that Sir Joseph Higginson is one of the richest men in the North of England, and will leave a big pile behind him when he hand in his checks. And he has only this girl—only this one ewe lamb. The stakes are stupendous."

It was August when Sir Joseph and his party went back to Cumberland—just three months after Marie Arnold's death—long enough with most people for sorrow to have assumed that milder form which may last for a lifetime, or dwindle by gentle degrees into forgetfulness. In this instance, however, grief had lost little of its intensity, and the return to the familiar home was full of pain. Both Sir Joseph and

his daughter were heroic in repressing all outward signs of sorrow, and the only change in the father was the look of age which had come upon him with a strange suddenness at the time of Marie's tragic death, together with a marked lessening of that physical energy which a year ago had made the active supervision of his estate an amusement and a delight. He handed over the burden of his cares to Andrew Orlebar, and rarely looked at a business document; languidly assenting to everything his secretary proposed; and had Orlebar been of a less incorruptible honesty, the great Argosy of Sir Joseph Higginson's fortune might have sprung a leak.

The change which grief had wrought in the daughter was less marked, and the outer world might have supposed only that Sibyl Higginson was ripening from the light-hearted girl into the thoughtful woman; but Urquhart, who marked her closely, saw that all the gladness had gone out of her young life. She had a

look of anxious thought which a wife of ten years' standing might have had in the absence of an adored husband—a look as of one whose heart is far away. All the amusements and occupations of her life had lost their savour, except only music, that divine art which of all others has the power to soothe, and even to console, to lift the mind from the actual to the unseen, to suggest, if it cannot reveal, the spiritual joys of a life beyond the grave.

Music had been, after religion, Sibyl's chief consolers during those dull days at Schwalbach, and now, on returning to Ellerslie, she flew to her piano in the octagon room, where the frescoes on the walls seemed to smile a welcome after the longest interval in which the lovely living face had been absent since those fair ideal faces were painted. The thought of Marie flashed into her mind as she struck the first chord of a pensive voluntary, and she seemed to hear the rich, round notes of the mezzo-soprano thrilling in the opening bars of the

Agnus Dei they loved, in that 12th Mass, which, whether by Mozart or [not by Mozart, will always be dear to music-lovers.

Yes, this was home—the familiar room where all that art and wealth could do had been done to surround everyday life with beauty. Sibyl was glad to be at home again, even although that home was haunted by bitter memories, and the shadow of a vanished form met her at every turn of the garden or the wood, on the moorland, or by the river; the shadow of her companion of seven happy years—the shadow of the man who in a few short weeks had given a new colour to her life. Both were but shadows now; one lying in the village churchyard; the other vanished, his fate unknown.

As time wore on Sibyl began to believe with Urquhart that Brandon had gone down with the crew of the *Mary Jane*. If he were living he would surely have made some sign. He must have understood that she would be anxious about his fate—or even if he had been so dull

of brain as not to sympathise with her feelings; common courtesy would have influenced him to write to the woman who had gone so far out of her way to aid his escape. Gradually, brooding over the work of that dark night, and recalling Urquhart's share in the work, she grew to suspect some hidden motive, and that an evil one, for the part which he had taken. Her suspicions were of the vaguest, for she could imagine no reason for double-dealing on his part; yet now that Brandon's flight had ended fatally, it seemed to her that no gentleman should have counselled so unmanly a course, and she hated herself for having urged Brandon to act against his own convictions.

Yes, it had been a mistake, and a fatal mistake—an error of judgment which had ended in ignominy and death. How much better to have faced the worst. The mystery of Marie Arnold's death might have been solved in the laborious investigation which a trial would have afforded. The keenest intelligence in the land,

the quick intellect of the trained advocate, might have been brought to bear upon crime and motive. The clue might have been found, the labyrinth threaded, and the real murderer discovered. By his disappearance Brandon had left the mystery dark, and his name disgraced.

Urquhart ceased to be Sir Joseph's guest after the return from Schwalbach, but he was still a neighbour, as he had established himself for the autumn at Killander Castle, and he rode or drove over to Ellerslie so frequently that it seemed to Sibyl as if he might as well have lived there.

She avoided him as much as possible, and spent the greater part of her life in the retirement of her morning-room, with no companion but the devoted Miss Minchin, and Muff, the old collie dog, which had been her faithful adorer from the days of puppyhood, when his youthful spirits had found vent in boisterous gambols and races on the lawns and in the pine wood. He was old and feeble now, and

liked best to lie at his ease on the lion skin which Brandon Mountford had presented to her in the beginning of their acquaintance, a trophy from the shores of the Zambesi. The governess was to remain with her pupil as companion and friend till the following spring, when Sibyl's aunt, Lady Selina Mountford, was to assume all the cares of chaperon, and was to conduct the heiress safely through the labyrinthine ways of the great world, to the hymeneal altar. The migration to Arlington street was to take place in February, and Miss Higginson was to be presented by Lady Braemar at the first drawing-room of the year.

The Braemars were established in the family house in Hertford street, the shabby old house within whose panelled walls Sir Joseph Higginson had wooed and won his wife. Lord Allandale was a confirmed invalid, and spent his life between Bath and various Bohemian health resorts, ministered to by a valet who was nearly as old as himself. Braemar, the heir-apparent,

was to all intents and purposes head of the house of Mountford. He was a busy man, a sportsman, fond of racing, fond of all amusements that cost money, and having very little money to spend, a man always over-occupied, and on his crowded brain even such an awful episode in the family history as Brandon Mountford's arrest on a charge of murder, had made no deep impression. He had written to Sir Joseph, expressing horror at the tragedy, and sympathy with the friends of the murdered girl, together with his opinion that Brandon could not have done the deed, or could only have done it in a fit of lunacy. “Mother died mad—very sad history. Nothing bad on the Mountford side. Foolish marriage. Know very little of the young man.”

This letter, in Braemar's jerky style, natural in a man who conducted his private correspondence chiefly by electric wire, had been the only notice taken of the Ellerslie tragedy by the house of Mountford, which had a happy

knack of dropping any member who got into trouble.

“If we didn’t cut the black sheep, with such an immense family as ours, we should be always in the law courts,” said the philosophical Braemar. “Our time would be taken up in watching Tom, Dick, and Harry through their troubles.”

CHAPTER VI.

“IN THE GREY DISTANCE, HALF A LIFE AWAY.”

SIR JOSEPH and his daughter had been at home nearly a month, and the grouse were being slaughtered on the moors. Lord Penrith was at the Castle with a small party of shooters, and had ridden over to Ellerslie twice within a week, and on his second visit had lunched alone with Sir Joseph, a visit that had lasted late into the afternoon, the two men strolling up and down the terrace after luncheon smoking their cigars—Sir Joseph's *Infantas* and Henry Clays were famous among his friends—and talking confidentially. Urquhart had been at Ellerslie on neither occasion. Indeed, Penrith had made a point of

his brother stopping to represent him with the shooters.

“I didn’t know you cared about Sir J.,” said Urquhart sulkily, when he heard of the second visit to Ellerslie.

“I don’t know what you mean by caring. Sir Joseph is a shocking old bounder, but as good as gold—and if one didn’t consort with bounders nowadays, one would have to take to a cavern in the desert.”

“But you are so exclusive,” sneered Urquhart, “and you care so little about society. You could afford to do without the bounders.”

“No doubt I could in a general way, but I can’t afford to do without Sir Joseph Higginson. I like the man, and I like his cigars, and I like—his daughter.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Urquhart, with a sudden drop of his lower jaw, “that’s the way the land lies, is it?”

“Yes,” answered Penrith, “that is the way. Have you any objection?”

“Objection! Of course not. The younger must give way to the elder. I have no pretensions to the cleverness of Jacob.”

Penrith laughed a dry, short laugh, as he stepped lightly into his high dog-cart. Poor Hubert! Well, he had had a long innings with the heiress, and it was Penrith's turn now. The fortress might be invincible, but putting a woman's fancy out of the question—and it was evident that Miss Higginson had no fancy for Urquhart—the suitor who could offer a coronet must have the better chance.

He found Sir Joseph a changed and broken man. It was less than a year since they had met, and it seemed to him that ten years of an ordinary lifetime could have made no more marked alteration in the old man's appearance and physique. He was utterly broken down.

Penrith knew that in dealing with so shrewd a man as Joseph Higginson any beating about the bush would be useless. He had not finished his first cigar on this second visit before he

came to the point, and offered himself as a suitor for Miss Higginson.

“My title is one of the oldest in the North of England,” he said. “I won’t say anything about my estate—for as the bulk of my property is near your own, I daresay you know its value as well as I do. I have suffered, as most people have suffered, from the fall in rents—but not to such an extent as some landowners. I don’t pretend, by any means, to be a rich man—but the Penrith property is a fine property, and only needs the outlay of a few thousands here and there in restoration and improvement. Houses, gardens, parks have gone to seed for want of ready cash. My house in Berkeley square, for instance—a house in a walled garden—one of the few old-world houses left in London. My wife might make a very pretty figure in the world, if she had a fortune of her own—and still more if she were young and beautiful, as your daughter is. She might be a leading light in the very best set.”

Sir Joseph's wan face lighted up. He did not love Lord Penrith—that hard Urquhart manner had always repelled him, but so far as he knew Penrith was a man of reputable character. Such dark things as had been said of Hubert Urquhart had never in Sir Joseph's hearing been said of the Earl. It was known that he had tried and failed to marry wealth on more than one occasion; but that failure could hardly be imputed to a man as a sin.

Sir Joseph wanted a coronet for his daughter. Last year, perhaps, strong in the bold ambition of a self-made man, he might have considered this particular coronet hardly good enough. He might have aspired to ducal strawberry leaves—or at least to rank allied with more prosperous fortunes than those of Penrith. But since that calamity of last May a weariness of life had come upon him, and he wanted to see his daughter married as soon as possible. He was perfectly frank with his visitor.

“Only six months ago I was looking forward

to Sibyl's first season with a good deal of pleasure," he said. "I loved to think of the success she would make in society with her fresh young beauty, and her expectations. I wanted to see her admired and followed, and to pick the best man among her followers. But I'm not so keen upon next year as I was a little time ago. I'm breaking up, Penrith. I fancy my race is pretty nearly run. I suppose I used to think myself immortal, for I was always speculating and scheming about the future—my grandchildren—my great-grandchildren even. I thought I might live to see new generations. God knows what I thought—ridiculous in a man of seventy. Well, that's over, and now I am eager to see my daughter settled—as people call it—before the curtain drops. That dark curtain comes down so unexpectedly on the stage of life, now and then, especially where a man has worked his brain as remorselessly as I have worked mine. A fibre snaps, and the rest is silence."

Penrith murmured some soothing remark about a fine constitution, a green old age.

“Men live well into the nineties nowadays,” he said.

“Some men do. I shan’t,” answered Sir Joseph, briefly. “I’ve had the tap of Constable Death on my shoulder, and the notice to move on. If Sibyl likes you well enough to be your wife, Lord Penrith—likes you as well as her mother liked me when we married—why, I will stand by your suit. And I will make such a settlement as will secure her fortune against all contingencies, but which shall not be illiberal towards you. There shall be margin enough of available capital to restore and improve the family seat and the house in town, and every homestead, and cottage, and every acre on your estate. If she can but like you? That’s the question.”

“I hope it may not be impossible for me to win something even better than liking,” said Penrith, with a stately air. “It ought not to

be a hopeless task if the young lady's affections are disengaged; and I take it that in the retirement of Ellerslie she is hardly likely to have met anyone worthy of her notice."

"No, no, she is heart-whole, I have no doubt," Sir Joseph answered somewhat confusedly. "She was terribly upset at the trouble we had here last May—our poor Marie's death—and Mountford's arrest. Mountford is a kind of cousin of my daughter's. A dreadful business altogether. She misses her adopted sister. She has not been the same girl since, any more than I have been the same man. Neither of us can forget."

Penrith looked at him keenly at that mention of Brandon Mountford, and then, in cold, incisive tones, he said—

"A terrible business, indeed, Sir Joseph. I conclude that there can be no doubt of Mountford's guilt, so far as an epileptic can be held guilty of a crime committed in a paroxysm of his disease."

“I don’t know about that. Indeed I am very doubtful. I should never have believed in his guilt if he had not broken out of gaol. Till I heard of his getting away like that I could have staked my life upon his innocence.”

“But if not he, who could the murderer have been?”

“God knows. Some roaming devil, who may have murdered her for the sake of her trinkets—a gold bangle—a diamond ring that I gave her on her last birthday, and which she always wore. The fact that the trinkets were not taken proves nothing, for the murderer may have been surprised by Brandon’s appearance on the scene.”

“They told me he was kneeling by the body, taken red-handed.”

“Any one who came accidentally upon the spot, and touched my poor girl’s blood-stained gown, as I believe Brandon did, would have been red-handed as he was. That proves nothing. The only suspicious circumstance

to my mind is his attempt to evade the law."

" Mightily suspicious. A painful story altogether, Sir Joseph. I am sorry for Lord Allandale and his clan. I need hardly say that I am still more sorry for you, and your loss of a dependent you were fond of in such a tragic manner."

"My loss of a dependent—yes—of whom I was fond. A dependent! I dare say you have heard people speculate upon the relations between Marie Arnold and me."

Penrith shrugged his shoulders in languid assent.

"People will talk," he said. "I am the last to trouble myself about what the world says, in print, or by word of mouth."

"People may have said that I should hardly have been so fond of a mere dependent, and that Marie Arnold must have been my daughter."

"That is the kind of thing people always say."

“Well, in this case they were right. She was my daughter.”

Penrith bent his head gravely.

“I am flattered by your confidence, and your directness,” he murmured.

“You are entitled to my confidence. There should be no secrets between us if you are to be my son-in-law. There must be no after-claps; no asking for explanations. You know pretty well what I am myself. You shall hear all that there is to be told about Marie Arnold’s birth and parentage.”

“Sir Joseph; if this revelation be in the least distressing to you I must beg you to let the matter rest. I do not seek to pry into your history, nor could a flaw of that kind in the record of your earlier life lessen the respect to which your character and position entitle you, and which you must always receive, unstintedly, from me. Men of the world do not look too severely upon such indiscretions. Pray let it pass.”

“No, no, it will be a relief to tell you. I have been a most miserable man since my poor girl’s death. I am not superstitious—but sometimes I think that her cruel death was a judgment upon me. I ought to have acknowledged her as my daughter. It would have been easy enough to assert an earlier marriage; my Sibyl would never have disputed the fact; and Marie could have been told to hold her tongue as to the date of her mother’s death. I ought to have given her her rightful position as my daughter—not my heiress—but my amply-dowered daughter. But I was a hypocrite and a coward. I allowed myself to be talked about as the benefactor of an orphan. I allowed my own flesh and blood to wear the livery of dependence. Well, the story is brief enough—common enough.”

There was a pause, and Sir Joseph walked the length of the terrace in silence, lighted a cigar, smoked a few whiffs, and tossed it away impatiently.

“ Arnold was an Englishman who had worked in Northern France for a good many years, and had married a French wife. She was from the South—a lovely creature, and had been married only a year when her husband came to me as overseer of an iron works which I had taken over from a bankrupt company. There had been folly, ignorance, neglect, and dishonesty. Everything was in confusion, and Arnold, who knew the district and the men, and who was more than half a Frenchman by long habit, was very useful to me. He was a man of remarkable talent, had been able to hold his own in various employments, but was a drunkard, and before he had been in my service three months I was told that he beat his pretty, young wife, and I was asked to interfere for her protection. Well, I called at their lodging, saw the wife, lectured the husband, held out hopes of promotion, and promised to do my very best for him if he would only keep away from the brandy shop.

He, on his part, promised amendment, was very plausible, and praised the virtues of his wife."

"And naturally broke his promise, before long," put in Penrith, whose languid air suggested that he was listening rather out of politeness than from any warm interest in the story.

"Yes. He went from bad to worse. He was a valuable servant, knew the place, and the plant, and where all had been chaos his knowledge and experience were particularly useful, but he was not a fit man to be in a post of authority, and there were continual complaints. I threatened dismissal, but didn't dismiss him. I saw his wife, and tried to bring her influence to bear upon him, but she was not a clever, managing woman. She was pretty, and she flung herself upon me for protection in her helplessness, complained of his violence, regretted her happy home in the south. Her people were poor, but they had always been

kind. With her husband she was often in fear of her life. I urged her, things being as bad as this, to go back to her family. I offered to send her home, but she was timid and irresolute. If she were to leave George Arnold he would follow and bring her back, and her position would be worse than ever. I could do nothing."

Another pause, another cigar pulled out, lighted, and flung away—and then Sir Joseph went on hurriedly.

"The crisis came one summer evening just as it was growing dark. Arnold had been drinking all day—drinking, and leaving his work to be done by a subordinate. I was afterwards told that he had not been sober for a week. There was a desperate scene; and his wife fled from him, came to my lodgings, and asked me to shelter and protect her.

"Well, Lord Penrith, you know what usually happens in such a case as that. She stayed with me. It was rather for fear of him than love of me that she stayed, I believe. It was

only with me that she felt herself safe. As owner of the works, and as a rich man, I was looked up to, and she fancied herself safer with me than with anybody else. George Arnold came to my lodgings on the following day—only half sober—threatening and violent, and I flung him out of doors like a dog. What pity could I have for a man who had taken a young creature like this French girl into his keeping, and had ill-used her from the very beginning of their married life? I had no pity, no compunction where he was concerned, but it was an awful thing to hear next morning that Arnold had been killed on the railroad, and that it was more than likely he had thrown himself in front of the train. No one knew that his wife had been under my roof at the time of his death. I provided a new home for her in a village three miles from the works. I did all I could to save her character, and I believe I succeeded. No one ever said that Louison Arnold was more to me than a helpless

woman whom I had befriended ; but she was fond of me, poor girl, her heart turned to me in her loneliness, and for half a year after her husband's death she and I were all the world to each other, and all my leisure hours were spent with her.

“I made her the promise which, I suppose, most men would have made in such circumstances. I promised to marry her, and I meant to keep my promise, later on, after the birth of her child ; but she had an unhappy disposition, fretful, exacting, jealous, and the bond of love had worn very thin before my daughter was born. The child's coming might have strengthened the tie, and I might have kept my promise, like an honest man, but Louison's conduct at this time was trivial and foolish. I discovered a flirtation with one of my clerks. I was very angry, and took her back to her native town in Provence, at an hour's warning, and established her with her child in the house which she inhabited for the rest of her life. I

allowed her a comfortable income, and I paid for her daughter's education at a convent near the mother's home, but I never saw her after my marriage. Love had long died out, and I could have approached her almost as a stranger, but I felt that to look upon the face of the woman who had been my mistress would be an offence against my wife."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT PEOPLE SAID.

SIR JOSEPH was pleased with Lord Penrith's quiet manner, both in advancing his own claims and in receiving that frank confession of past error. There was some touch of comfort for the sinner in Penrith's tranquil acceptance of the story, as a mere matter of course, an incident likely enough to happen in every man's life. He himself had been inclined to take a tragical view of that old story, and to recognise the scourge of the Furies in those sharp strokes which Fate had dealt him—first, George Arnold's suicide, for he had never doubted that the drunken husband had flung away his life in a fit of jealous rage—then

Lady Lucy's death—by an accident so common, but a blow so crushing to the man who adored her—and last and most terrible the murder of his unacknowledged daughter. A remorseful conscience saw in these calamities the judgment of an offended Heaven. It was a comfort, therefore, to talk to a man of Penrith's advanced school, who did not believe in angels, avenging or otherwise, and who looked upon man as the creature of circumstances and environment. Sir Joseph wanted to see his daughter married, settlements made, his colossal fortune secured so far as legal defences can secure wealth against the weakness or the folly of a wife or the treachery of a husband. The thought that this splendid fortune could be scattered and made away with was madness—this fortune which had grown under his care, from the first earnings of the peasant lad to the wealth of the man who owned property of almost every shape and form, from the mines and smelting works close at hand to the furthest

limits of mining enterprise in America and Australia. It would be a grand thing to see his daughter a Countess, with an impregnable marriage settlement. The conviction that his working day was nearly done had been growing upon him ever since Marie's death. He felt the shadows darkening round him. He had worked his brain with relentless activity, and of late there had been moments of trouble and confusion—the vain effort to recall a familiar name—the sudden clouding of ideas—which indicated that the fibres were wearing thin, and that the final obscuration, the fall of the dark curtain, might come suddenly. He was inclined, therefore, to assist Penrith's suit with all his paternal influence.

Why should not Sibyl like this aristocratic suitor? He had all the markings of an ancient race in the refined features and slender yet athletic form, the small hand and tapering fingers, the narrow arched foot—a true Norman type, with its suggestions of more distant

ancestors in the dim remoteness of the centuries before the conquest. The difference in their ages was considerable—the girl only eighteen—the man between thirty and forty, arrived at an age when a man begins to feel that the glory and the freshness of youth have departed, and that he is nearing the crest of the hill, the other side of which is all downward travelling. But this seniority should only lend dignity to his suit. It ought to be more gratifying to a girl's pride to be admired and esteemed by a man of Penrith's age and intellectual weight than to be worshipped by a stripling fresh from Christchurch or Sandhurst.

It was a bitter disappointment to Sir Joseph when, after confiding Penrith's hopes and his own views to Sibyl, he was met by a deliberate refusal.

"I don't think I shall ever marry," she said. "At any rate, there is nothing farther from my thoughts at present. I want to stay with you, dear father—always."

“Always may not mean very long,” Sir Joseph muttered moodily, and then he strongly urged the advantages of a marriage with Penrith—an old peerage—Lady Penrith would take precedence of most of the countesses in England—an estate adjoining that which she was to inherit, a castle that had stood like a rock against the assaults of Scottish freebooters in the days when it was a perilous thing to live on the Marches. For dignity, for historic interest, there could hardly be a finer match. Sir Joseph grew angry as he noted Sibyl’s scornful lip and resolute eye.

“Do you want to marry a duke?” he exclaimed. “Is that why you turn up your nose at an offer most girls would snap at?”

“I don’t want to marry at all, father.”

“No, not this year; but next year you will be in London, surrounded by adventurers, and the first fortune-hunting scamp—rake-hell or gambler—who takes your fancy will have a

better chance than Penrith, with his thirty thousand acres and ancient name."

"I am not afraid of fortune-hunters."

"Very likely not ; but I am."

"Don't take me to London, then, next year, or any other year. I don't care for society, father. I am as happy as I ever can be, here with you."

"Sibyl, that's all very well, but it can't last. I am an old man, and our parting—our last parting, my dear—may come sooner than you expect. You think it nothing to give up society, and all the pleasures to which my daughter has a right, but that's only because you don't know what the great world is like. You've heard it abused—its pleasures called Dead Sea fruit. That's all nonsense. It's a very pleasant world for youth and wealth, whatever it may be for the worn-out and the needy. No doubt they get the taste of dust and ashes—but the fruit will be fresh and sweet to your lip. You must take your position in society next season, Sibyl,

married or unmarried. Your aunt Selina would not hear of your presentation being delayed after your nineteenth birthday."

Sibyl did not dispute this point, but she was firm in her refusal of Lord Penrith.

He was to come to Ellerslie in a few days to hear her verdict. He had begged that she might not be hurried in her decision. He wished that she should have ample time to consider the manifold advantages he had to offer. He would have been cut to the quick could he have known with what indifference Sibyl contemplated that offer, and that the only point which had moved her in her father's arguments was Sir Joseph's gloomy foreshadowing of his own death. Her thoughts were full of sadness as she walked up and down the terrace where only a few months ago she had been so light-hearted and happy. It was still early in September, and Autumn had scarcely touched the foliage in park or woods—only September, and she remembered herself as she

had been last Spring, when the leaves on yonder plane tree were unfolding, while the beech buds were still purple. How happy, how thoughtless she had been in those lengthening April days, amused with the veriest trifles; and now it seemed to her as if life were one load of care. Look where she would, the horizon was dark.

She had lived almost in seclusion since her return from the Continent. The few cottagers—fisher families at Ardliston, pitmen's families nearer home—whom she had visited had received her, as she thought, somewhat ungraciously. There was a change of some kind, a want of cordiality. They had answered all her questionings as to their own welfare, and had accepted her gifts with a certain sullenness. She had avoided Susan Kettering, shuddering at the memory of the widow's frantic vehemence in the day of mourning; but two or three days after Penrith's second visit to Ellerslie she called on Susan Kettering's aunt, the widow Garforth, and again offered help for the orphan

children. The aunt declined all help in the niece's name.

“It's poor Susan's whim to do without your help, Miss,” she said, “and she must have her own way. She's just a heart-broken creature, and, right or wrong, she puts her grief to your door, and she says she'd rather see those children starve than touch a sixpence of your money. They needn't starve, anyhow, poor bairns, for Susan can earn a little with charing. She's been working up at the Higginson Arms four days a week, and there's others—uncles and aunts—to help a bit, so there's no call for you to take it to heart, Miss, whatever folks may say.”

“I care nothing what people say,” Sibyl answered, haughtily. “I only want to help those poor children, I cannot be in the slightest measure responsible for their father's death. He was asked to take out his boat, and offered a price for his night's work. He was free to refuse, if he saw any risk.”

“Of course he was, Miss. Everybody can see that, except poor Susan. She raves about the money that tempted him—your money. I don’t believe he had ever had the chance of making so much money in all his life till that night.”

“He refused at first, then?”

“Yes, poor fellow. He saw there was dirty weather coming. He didn’t mean to take his boat out that tide, but it was a heap of money to earn in a single night, and Mr. Urquhart put it to him—it would be the making of his fortune, and it might save Mr. Mountford from the gallows. And when Susan heard of the money, she begged him to go—that’s what preys upon her mind, Miss; but she has no call to lay the blame at your door, and set people talking.”

Those phrases of Mrs. Garforth’s about what people said haunted Sibyl’s memory with uncomfortable persistency. What should people say to her discredit? What reason had she to

be ashamed, even if all that could be known about that dreadful night were known to the little world of Ellerslie and Ardliston? She could understand that the widow might be blindly resentful, but what right had other people to blame her? There was no act of hers upon that night of which she felt ashamed; for the violation of the law at which she had assisted did not trouble her conscience. She saw no more shame in that than the lion-hearted Countess of Nithsdale could have seen in her rescue of her husband from the block.

What could people say?

The neighbours at Ellerslie were of the fewest, for, except Killander Castle, there was no country seat within a radius of ten miles, the greater part of the land within that radius being owned by Lord Penrith and Sir Joseph Higginson. A retired colonel of a Highland regiment, with his wife and daughters, and an evangelical vicar and his wife, both middle-aged people, were Sibyl's only genteel neighbours within

walking distance, and these two families provided enough gentility to keep a whole parish going. What could people say? Sibyl asked herself with troubled brow, as she paced the terrace, where so much of her life was spent in fine weather, while the horses were idle in the stable, and the boats lay unused in the boat-house by the river—that river which she had never willingly looked upon since Marie Arnold's death. What could people say? She remembered now a certain touch of patronage in the manner of Mrs. Denton, the vicar's wife, a sort of "poor dear" air; a soothing look and tone which seemed to say, "I shall always be your friend, however other people may treat you." She had thought nothing of that indefinite change at the time, too weary of mind and heart to be on the alert for shades of meaning in Mrs. Denton's local twaddle; but now, recalling that last tea-drinking, she remembered that there had been a change. Those fulsome flatteries which had implied that Sir Joseph's

daughter was only a little lower than the angels, had given place to a pitying tenderness of tone and manner, insufferable to think of now that she took the trouble to recall it.

She remembered too that there had been a shade of coldness in Mrs. Macfarlane's manner when they met in a pitman's cottage, the elder lady distributing tracts and good advice, the younger orders for soup and wine. She remembered that the Macfarlanes, who had always been precise to pernickettyness in the interchange of afternoon calls, had not called at Ellerslie since her return from Schwalbach. Sibyl had not noticed the omission till now, thankful to be left in her melancholy solitude; but now it seemed to her that her neighbours had been purposely distant. She went from the terrace to the drawing-room, where an open piano and a volume of Beethoven offered that form of consolation which always soothed her nerves and lifted her soul out of the abyss of gloom. But to-day even music seemed to have

lost some of its power. She played the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata, and then rose, and moved slowly about the room, looking at the pictures on the walls, the marble Hebe, with its background of tall palms, the tables loaded with bric-a-brac, the valuable books piled carelessly on other tables—books that had been chosen mostly for her sake, Sir Joseph ordering any new book or new edition which he thought might please his daughter.

How splendid it all was ; but how lonely ! Sir Joseph lived chiefly in the seclusion of his own rooms, seeing no one but Andrew Orlebar, and only joining his daughter at dinner, and after dinner, when he would ask her to play to him, and sit in melancholy silence while she played.

Miss Minchin had gone home to her invalid mother. Lady Selina was in Scotland with the Braemars, but was to arrive at Ellerslie early in October and take up her position officially, as Miss Higginson's chaperon, till she should be

released from that grave duty by Miss Higginson's marriage. Sir Joseph had contrived to convey to her mind that, as he could not presume to offer stipend or pecuniary consideration of any sort to a woman of Lady Selina's social standing, her kindness to her niece would be substantially remembered in his will, on which his sister-in-law had assured him, firstly, that she hoped he would outlive her; secondly, that she existed only to be useful to her people; thirdly, that any little legacy he might be generous enough to bequeath to her would be a most welcome addition to her wretched income.

"You know what a struggle it is for the unmarried daughters of a poor nobleman to live like ladies," said Lady Selina; "the wonder is that they manage to live at all."

Sir Joseph further conveyed to his sister-in-law that the frocks and millinery which she would require during Sibyl's first season were to be included in Sibyl's bills.

“You are too good, my dear Joseph. You won’t find me extravagant. One or two walking gowns, and a satin frock or so, with my own lace, for the evenings, will carry me through the season.”

Everything had been settled, therefore, and in the mean time Sibyl, who dreaded her aunt’s frivolous loquacity, had been thankful to be alone. Till to-day there had been no oppression in the sense of solitude, only an immense relief, but now, by this new light, suggested by Mrs. Garforth’s tactless speech, the solitude galled.

Was she, Sibyl Higginson, who from her babyhood had been accustomed to the adulation of everybody about her, and had grown unconsciously—without any lessening of her generous impulses and sympathy with others—to regard herself in some sort as a personage—was she to be patronised by a vicar’s wife, and cut by a half-pay Colonel and his family? The thought was intolerable. The impetuous blood of youth mounted to the fair temples, and when a servant

threw open the drawing-room door and announced Mr. Urquhart Sibyl hardly waited for the door to be shut before she turned to the visitor with indignant vehemence, and exclaimed—

“Did you know this, Mr. Urquhart? Have you known all along of the cruel things people have been saying about me—here, in this place, where they have known me since I was a little child?”

She burst into tears, the first she had shed since the interview with Mrs. Garforth, which had cut her to the quick. They were tears of anger rather than of sorrow.

Bewildered for the moment by the vehemence of this outburst, Urquhart gently questioned the indignant girl, and drew from her all the story of Susan Kettering's insolence, and Mrs. Garforth's hints of scandal—of Mrs. Denton's compassionate airs, and Mrs. Macfarlane's coldness. Hubert Urquhart was essentially an “Opportunist,” quick to seize on any aspect of events

that could be turned to his own advantage—and in Sibyl's wounded feelings he saw a golden opportunity for the ripening of his own schemes. Until Penrith's appearance on the scene he had meant to take things very quietly—to wait and watch with the patience of Bruce's proverbial spider. His faith had been large in the opportunities that time always brings. But Penrith's rivalry altered the whole aspect of the case, and his only chance of success was a coup de main.

“My dear Sibyl, I am sure you have too enlightened a mind to be distressed by village gossip,” he began, deprecatingly.

“They *have* talked about me, then?”

“Of course they have talked—people talked about Joan of Arc—and there were slanders about Charlotte Corday. Nothing romantic or heroic can escape being talked about. Your visit to the lock-up, and your energetic help in Mountford's escape got known somehow—and naturally people have talked. There is not

much to be said—no ground for scandal—but people in country places have a way of saying things. Miss Higginson must have been very much attached to Mr. Mountford before she could take such a step—and then they go on harping upon your attachment, and weaving a web of lies round a small nucleus of truth, until the thing grows into a scandal—and mothers shake their heads and say they would not like their daughters to behave as Miss Higginson behaved—and fathers say that Brandon Mountford was a scoundrel—and stories—so circumstantial as to seem true—are told of Sir Joseph's anger and your tears—and speeches that never were spoken are quoted and commented upon. My dear Sibyl, there is nothing that grows so quickly as a scandal—there needs but a grain of seed to produce a mighty tree, and all the carrion crows of the neighbourhood flap their wings and croak and scream among its branches. But what need you care? You know the purity of your own motives.”

“Yes, I know my own motives—and his noble character—but it is too cruel that he should be maligned. I can answer to my God for what I did. If I broke the law—”

“It is hardly so much the breach of the law these people talk about, as the departure from the conventional rules that hedge round a young lady in your position—forgive me if I wound you by repeating their malicious speeches—the running after your lover.”

He tried to put as much unpleasant emphasis upon that last word as it would carry; but to Sibyl's innocence the word meant very little. She understood, however, that unkind things had been said—unkind to him whose fate she knew not, and whose memory she fondly cherished.

“Sibyl, there is one—and only one—way of cutting through the web that entangles you. The quickest, simplest way,” he said, eagerly, drawing nearer to her, with a sudden fire in his cold hard face, taking her hand in both his own.

“Give me the right to defend your good name against all the world. I was with you all through that night. I can answer for the purity of your motives—the generous impulse that urged you to depart from the beaten track of conduct. No one will dare to speak ill of you when you have a husband to answer for you—a husband familiar with your life from your childhood, and who knows that it is spotless. Give me that right, Sibyl—give me the reward of my patient love.”

“No, no, no, not for the world,” she said passionately. “How can you dream of such a thing, knowing what you know? Do you think I am so fickle or so weak? You know I loved Brandon Mountford, and that it was only his sad affliction that forbade our being engaged lovers.”

“The past is past. You can never marry Mountford—dead or living, he is lost to you. But marriage is your only escape from the scandal that has grown out of that fatal night.

Sibyl, for your own sake, I must be plain with you. I know the world of which you know nothing—know it too well—and I know that the cloud which darkens your name in this place will follow you to London, and that your entrance into society will be overshadowed by that odious scandal—vague—from its very vagueness impossible to confute. You cannot live down that scandal by yourself alone. It will be the signal for the basest adventurers to hunt you as their destined prey. No one but a husband—a man of position—can come between you and the venom of the world in which beauty and wealth are the mark for malice.”

“Is that so?” asked Sibyl suddenly, “would these people be sorry for their unkindness if I were to marry a man of position in their paltry world—a man of rank?”

“Assuredly they would,” said Urquhart, his face lighting up triumphantly.

She had wrenched her hand from his, and in this moment of fancied success he tried again to

seize it—tried to put his arm round her waist, fully believing that his cause was won—won much more easily than he had hoped, even when resolved on trying to take her by storm.

She repulsed him angrily. Her face was flushed ; her eyes flamed. She ran to the bell and rang it violently.

“Was that Lord Penrith’s phaeton which drove past the window half an hour ago ?” she asked the servant.

“Yes, ma’am. His Lordship is with Sir Joseph in the study.”

“Ask him to come to me—here—directly.”

“Sir Joseph, ma’am ?”

“No, Lord Penrith.”

“What do you want with my brother ?” asked Urquhart, when the man was gone.

“You shall hear.”

Sibyl was walking about the room, her heart beating violently, her breath quickened, her hands clasped tightly together in the agony of a desperate determination. She was at the

age when the happiness of a lifetime is often hazarded upon the impulse of a moment—the age of vehement feeling and sudden resolve. Indignation and wounded pride had mastered every other thought.

Penrith appeared, pale, grave, prepared for a serious interview, but in no wise prepared for his brother's presence. He gave Urquhart a curt nod, as he approached Sibyl.

Their hands met, and he stood looking at her, surprised at the crimson flush on her cheeks and the angry light in her eyes.

“You sent for me, and I came with delight,” he said gently. “I'm sure you must know how eager I am to see you. But you look distressed — I fear there is something the matter.”

He turned from Sibyl to Hubert questioningly.

“Lord Penrith, my father told me a few days ago that you wished me to be your wife. Do you still wish it ?”

“Still—always—with my whole heart.”

“But perhaps you don’t know that people in this neighbourhood have said unkind things about me because I helped Mr. Mountford to escape — convinced that he was innocent of poor Marie’s death.”

“I have heard nothing—if I did hear—well, I should let people know my opinion of them, for daring to speak unkindly of you.”

“But you know that I broke the law in helping Mr. Mountford to escape—that I gave the money which tempted the owner of the *Mary Jane* to risk his life. The boat was lost—with all on board. They say at Ardliston that those lives lie at my door.”

She clasped her hands before her face to hide the tears that rushed to her eyes at that thought.

“I know that you can have done nothing that was not noble and high-minded.”

“I loved him,” faltered Sibyl. “I am not ashamed of my love—even now. I can never

care for anyone on this earth as I cared for him—but if,” she continued, dashing away her tears and confronting Penrith with a resolute look, “if, knowing this, which I have told you in the presence of your brother, who was with me—and acted for me—on that fatal night—if knowing this, Lord Penrith, you still wish to take me for your wife——”

“Still wish—earnestly, passionately!” cried Penrith, seizing her hands, and trying to draw her to his breast.

There was triumph, ecstasy almost, in his face and voice, if not the ring of real passion. To have won her—to have won beauty, youth, and fortune so easily—was more than he had ever hoped. He flashed an exultant glance at his brother, as he put his arm round Sibyl’s waist.

“My love, my wife,” he cried. “Life has nothing left to give me now.”

Hubert Urquhart had been standing a little way off, with his back to a wide window—a

window with plate-glass doors, opening on to the terrace, a window which gave light and brightness, and air, and egress and ingress, but which every æsthetically-minded visitor at Ellerslie condemned as an error in taste.

Standing with his back to that flood of light, Urquhart's face had been in dense shadow, and neither the diabolical scowl nor the livid hue of his countenance as he witnessed this impromptu betrothal had been noticed by his brother or Sibyl. Both were startled by the venom which hissed from his lips in a burst of ironical felicitation.

"I congratulate you, Miss Higginson, upon a coup de theatre that would have done honour to Rachel in her zenith—a dramatic situation more daring than anything Dumas fils has ever attempted. You wanted a husband to patch up your damaged reputation—that fact was clear to me just now when I offered you my unworthy self and a younger brother's modest status. But you are more ambitious than I

thought you. I did not know that you wanted to repair your blemished character with the prestige that hangs about an Earl's coronet, that you counted upon buying a title with the million or so which your worthy coal-mining, iron-founding, money-grubbing father is ready to give as solatium to the husband who is willing to marry——”

Some word followed, only half pronounced between clenched teeth—only the beginning of some infamous word, no syllable of which ever reached Sibyl's ear, and which ended in a crash of plate-glass that rang through Ellerslie House and brought master and servants, indoor and out-of-door, hurrying to the scene.

Happily for Hubert Urquhart, and perhaps still more happily for Lord Penrith, the heavy glass doors were standing ajar when with one blow, impelled by passion too strong for speech, the elder brother hurled the younger backwards through the parting casements on to the

terrace outside. It was the shock of the doors flying asunder as Urquhart fell between them which had shattered the two tall panels of glass and sent a shower of splinters flashing and sparkling in the sunlight. The flush of anger had faded from Penrith's forehead by the time Sir Joseph entered the room, and he met the baronet's eager questioning with perfect self-possession.

"I am sorry I lost my temper and broke your window," he said; "but if a scoundrel insults the woman one loves—or indeed any woman—what can one do but knock him down, and Mr. Urquhart happened to be standing awkwardly near your window. Pray don't be distressed, Sibyl. You will never again be subjected to my brother's brutality, for he shall never enter any house of mine, and I am sure your father will have nothing more to do with him."

"What has he done—what has he said?" asked Sir Joseph in utter bewilderment.

“Nothing worth talking about—only an explosion of malevolence. He wanted to marry Miss Higginson, and behaved like a lunatic when he heard her promise to be my wife.”

“What, she has promised then?”

“I am proud to say she has,” answered Penrith, taking Sibyl’s hand.

“Thank God!” exclaimed Sibyl’s father.

While this brief conversation was proceeding Hubert Urquhart was lying on his back upon the gravel walk outside, unconscious of all surrounding things.

Dr. Dewsnap, who looked to his injuries half an hour afterwards, was able to assure Sir Joseph that although his patient was suffering from slight concussion of the brain, he would most likely be quite well next day.

[CHAPTER VIII.

LADY PENRITH'S IDEA.

THE story of Sibyl Higginson's girlhood has been told. She now reappears on the scene in the maturity of her beauty, in the calm strength of a cultivated intellect, with all the power and influence that rank and wealth can give in a world where both are objects of almost fanatical worship, a woman much admired and courted, and sincerely loved by the numerous nephews and nieces to whom she is never weary of showing kindness. Yet for all that a lonely woman, childless, fatherless, living her own life, unsustained by the sympathy or affection of her husband.

Sir Joseph's foreshadowing of the end proved

a true forecast. He died suddenly at his house in London, in the first year of his daughter's marriage, and after seeing her take her place in the great world with distinction; and the vast wealth which he had accumulated in half a century of laborious enterprise passed at once to Sibyl, Countess of Penrith, guarded and hedged round by those wise restrictions which Sir Joseph's lawyers had attached to her marriage settlement. Sibyl's fortune might make Lord Penrith a rich man, but Lord Penrith had no power to make his wife a pauper. Sometimes in an angry mood he spoke of himself contemptuously as her ladyship's pensioner.

The house in Arlington Street was sold soon after Sir Joseph's death, and according to the terms of his will; but all that was choicest in a remarkable collection of pictures and curios was transferred to Lady Penrith's rooms in Berkeley square, or to the castle in the Marches. She was pleased to surround herself with the things her father's taste had selected. Nor was she

unwise in the desire to keep the pictures which he had chosen, for the self-educated, humbly-born millionaire had that gift of instinctive taste which secures a man against errors in judgment. Sir Joseph had invested largely in the fine arts, but not unwisely, and the bulk of his collection realised large prices, and swelled the sum of Sibyl's wealth.

No ray of light had been cast on Brandon Mountford's fate in the ten years that had gone by since his escape from the lock-up at Ardliston, and Sibyl could hardly doubt that he had gone down to his death with the crew of the *Mary Jane*. Susan Kettering's children were growing up into sturdy lads and lassies, and it had been Lady Penrith's care that they should be well provided for, the boys apprenticed, the girls started in domestic service with all the belongings of respectability. Susan Kettering had long ago repented of her unjust anger against Sir Joseph's daughter, and had learnt to be grateful to the benefactress who had made the

years of her widowhood smooth and prosperous. There was no one in that north country more beloved and respected than Lady Penrith. She was a distinguished personage in the great world of London; but in that smaller world around Killander Castle and Ellerslie Park she was a queen.

Ellerslie House had never been occupied by strangers, though in the nine years since Sir Joseph's death Lady Penrith had only lived in it for a few days at a time once or twice a year. His Lordship spoke scornfully of the folly of maintaining a costly house and grounds which required the labour of about a dozen people, for such brief occupancy; but Sibyl reminded her husband that as the shooting and fishing were of use to himself and his friends he had no right to complain.

There was at least one inhabitant of Ellerslie House above the status of a servant, and that was Andrew Orlebar, who had occupied his old rooms and moved about house and gardens

and home farm in his old quiet way ever since Sir Joseph's death. He was Lady Penrith's land steward and general business manager. He held all the threads of that golden web of which she was the centre. He knew the value of every investment Sir Joseph had ever made, for he had watched them all from the beginning; and he might have been questioned at any moment as to yesterday's closing price of any stock held by Lady Penrith without being out in his reply by so much as an eighth.

Andrew Orlebar lived at Ellerslie all the year round, and never complained of wintry weather or want of society. He was much respected in the district, and looked up to as a man whose advice on money matters was worth a little extra courtesy. He was nearly seventy, but no less active and industrious than when he entered Joseph Higginson's service as timekeeper and clerk at thirty. Nothing at Ellerslie had been altered. The rooms in which Sibyl's childhood and youth had been spent were exactly as she

had known them then; and it pleased her sometimes to turn her back upon a large house-party at the Castle to spend a quiet day in those silent rooms, with no companion but her piano and Andrew Orlebar, with whom she would take tea in Sir Joseph's study, and who delighted to make her look through his accounts of the half-year's payments to her banker.

"You have a surplus from last year's income that ought to be invested," he would say. "Your balance is needlessly large."

"Do what you like with it, my dear Andrew," was her usual reply; "your investments never go wrong; but first let us remember the poor."

And then she would tell him of some charity in which she was interested—some great work vouched for by good and great men, and she would allot to that scheme of beneficence perhaps the whole of her surplus. If Andrew Orlebar argued that she was giving away too much, that she was not allowing her fortune its natural development, she would answer with a sad smile

that she had no motive for being richer, that she had wealth enough and more than enough, having no children among whom to divide it, no family to establish, spreading out into other families, carrying her riches into new channels.

“For a solitary woman to go on amassing wealth for the mere pleasure of piling up money would be horrible,” she said.

Joseph Orlebar shook his head dubiously.

“Great fortunes must grow,” he said; “it doesn’t do for them to stand still. The value of the sovereign steadily decreases, and a rich man who doesn’t add to his investments will find himself a poor man some day, without knowing why. You must really allow me to invest half your surplus in one of our home railways—the stock is very high, but it will go higher.”

The discussion generally ended in a compromise. Half the surplus income went to the charity, and half was invested at Orlebar’s discretion. He was very careful in his administration of his principal’s fortunes. The days of

neck-or-nothing enterprises which had helped to make Joseph Higginson a millionaire were over.

“I go plodding on among investments that cannot bring more than four and a half per cent. at the outside,” he said; “but the responsibility is too great for me to risk anything. I can’t play pitch and toss with tens of thousands, as your dear father did. Ah, those were fine times in Arlington Street, when you were a little girl. He used to take my breath away; but whatever stock he touched always turned up trumps. He had the genius of finance. And it was all for your sake. ‘I am building up a pile for my little girl,’ he used to say; and he did build up a pile. Those old Egyptian Pharaohs were thought to have done a grand thing when they left a pyramid behind them; but what’s the good of a pyramid? It’s neither useful nor ornamental. The fortune your father left is both. Look at the Higginson Orphanage, the Higginson Almshouses for pitmen’s widows,

the Higginson Schools! Aren't those useful, and ornamental too? Your work, all your work, I know, my dear lady; but you couldn't have built 'em without his money."

"No, indeed. They are his work, and his only. It has been my greatest happiness to found institutions that will make his name remembered in the years to come, when there will be no one living who can remember him."

"Ah, that's a sad thought, ain't it? Fifty years, or so, and there's no one left whose memory can conjure up the figure of the man as he lived. There's a portrait or two, more or less like him. Herkomer's is about as like as paint can be to flesh and blood. But the memory of him as he lived and moved—the quick turn of his head, all life and energy—the curious little twitch of his eyebrow when he was puzzled—that slow, thoughtful smile when he was going to do a kindness to anyone—his deep, full voice, a little rough sometimes, but very gentle to those he loved! Fifty years, and no

one on this earth will be able to recall those things that are so near and vivid now! It seems hard, don't it?"

Sibyl loved to hear the old man talk, were he never so prosy; and those quiet afternoons at Ellerslie were always a restful change from the statelier life of Killander Castle.

Coralie having expressed herself very anxious to see a house of which she had heard a great deal, Lady Penrith took her over to Ellerslie one October afternoon—within a few days of that long afternoon wasted on futile inquiries and the vain endeavour to solve the mystery of the pencil scrawl.

Cora ran about the house looking at everything, and rapturous about everything, with that equality of praise which bespeaks the ignorant admirer; and while the younger lady was amusing herself by a tour of inspection the elder was closeted with Andrew Orlebar, from whom she had no secrets, and to whom she

showed the scrap of paper which had stirred such hidden depths of feeling.

“It is so like his hand,” she said.

And then she placed the poor scrawl side by side with a little note written in the early morning, before one of their river excursions—proposing a pic-nic luncheon at a particular spot, suggesting that Sibyl and her companion should take their books and sketching materials—or their latest craze in the way of needle-work—and make a day of it; a note sportive and playful, which committed the writer to no expression of feeling, yet which seemed to breathe fondest admiration of her to whom it was written. It was his first letter. How she had treasured it, in that golden time; and in all the years since that brief dream of love.

Other letters had followed—letters about further excursions—about books—about music—playful little notes written in the morning about disputed points in the conversation over-night, a misquoted line by Tennyson or Brown-

ing—notes about anything, or about nothing. There is no surer sign of a man being deep in love than this inclination to scribble futilities to a lady while living under the same roof with her. The necessary separations of daily life are too long for him. He must needs bridge them over with nonsense-letters. He cannot stand under her window and serenade her, like a lover of old romance; so he writes, and writes, and writes.

“There is certainly a resemblance between the two hands,” said Orlebar, after scrutinising both documents through a reading glass, which magnified every stroke, “but what of that? You may often find a resemblance as marked in the penmanship of men who are total strangers to each other, and cannot have grown to write alike by unconscious imitation; and how can you for a moment suppose that this scrap of paper given you by some crazy mendicant on the moor could emanate from Brandon Mountford, who disappeared ten years ago,

and whom we have every reason to believe dead?"

"Every reason, but no positive proof," answered Sibyl, thoughtfully. "The man who gave me that paper may have been crazy, but he was certainly not a beggar. He thrust the paper into my hand, and ran away. He wanted nothing from me. His conduct was like that of a messenger—an ignorant man—who had been told to watch for my carriage and to give me that paper."

"And you think he was sent by Brandon Mountford?" asked Orlebar, with a pitying smile.

The delusions of romantic love know no limits. He knew—partly from his observation of her, partly by her own confession—how fondly this woman had loved Brandon Mountford—and he contemplated her hallucination of to-day with tenderest compassion.

Poor child, poor woman, whose life had, for the last ten years, been loveless! What wild

possibilities an empty heart can conjure out of the thinnest cloud of suggestion.

“I don’t know what to think.”

“My dear lady, pray don’t delude yourself by hopes that are as unreal as those mountain ranges and giant’s caverns which you used to show me in the evening sky, years ago, on yonder terrace, when we walked up and down together after dinner. I don’t think any rational person can have a shadow of doubt that poor Mountford went down in the *Mary Jane*, or that—under the influence of his terrible disease—he committed the crime which brought such misery on this house.”

“That I will never believe,” said Lady Penrith indignantly.

“No, no; you won’t believe because you can’t understand. You don’t know what it is when a devil of madness—blind, desperate, raging against he knows not what—enters into a man, and cries ‘Kill! kill!’ You can’t understand that—nor can I, or any sane person. But we

know that such things are. And if it was so, don't you think Providence dealt kindly with all of us in sending that poor fellow to a death that had no shame in it—a moment's wild uncertainty, and then whirled out of this life in one deafening blast, one uplifting of the awful sea? Upon my word, Lady Penrith, since everyone of us must die somehow, I doubt if one could die easier than in a tempest."

"He was innocent—innocent!" ejaculated Sibyl, her eyes brimming with angry tears. "I know quite as much about it as you do. I have studied the books that describe his malady. A man does not reach that violent stage of the disease all at once. Brandon had only suffered from the milder form of attack. He may have had a worse seizure that day, perhaps. He had been agitated and unhappy—he had been anxious and worried for some time previously. The period of unconsciousness was much longer—no doubt it was a bad attack—but the impulse to kill never touched him. I would stake my

life upon that. You must look somewhere else for the murderer of Marie Arnold—somewhere as near, perhaps—— ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I can't tell you. There are some suspicions too dreadful to be uttered. I dare not tell you mine. But I can and do declare that Brandon Mountford was no murderer.”

There was a silence. Orlebar was perplexed and troubled by those dark hints of hers. He was quick to catch at an idea—and the only idea that Sibyl's words suggested was terrible. He would not give it room in his mind.

“ But if this unhappy man were alive, why should he have allowed all these years to pass without making any sign—without writing to you, to whom he owes so much ? ”

“ He may have been unable—for some cause or other.”

“ It is difficult to imagine a cause, and if he were living and a free agent, such silence would imply base ingratitude.”

“No, no, what I did was nothing—or it may have been the worst that could have been done—the worst for his good name, certainly—for it confirmed the people about here in the idea of his guilt. I may have fallen into a trap set for him and me. He had no cause for gratitude, and there might be reasons—his regard for my reputation among other reasons—why he should hold no communication with me.”

“Granted. But in that case, why after a silence of many years approach you in such an eccentric fashion as this?” asked Orlebar, pointing to the scrap of paper with those few incoherent words scrawled in pencil.

“Must I tell you what I have thought of in the long sleepless nights since that message was given me? It is hateful to speak of it, but I can imagine no other solution. I believe he is somewhere in this neighbourhood, mad, and a prisoner.”

“My dear lady, that is the wildest flight of imagination upon your part.”

“Perhaps—but that is the only explanation I can find for this.”

She laid her finger on the pencilled lines before Andrew Orlebar, and then took up the little scrap of paper and put it away in her purse as carefully as if it had been the most precious thing she possessed.

“I have begun to look for him,” she said, quietly, “and I shall go on looking for him.”

CHAPTER IX.

CORALIE'S JOURNAL—FOR PATERNAL INSPECTION.

My dear aunt has certainly become an altered woman within the last week. She who was lately calm as a statue, composed, dignified, moving with queenlike motion through a life that seemed to have lost all interest for her, now looks like a woman whose every nerve is strung to highest tension, whose delicate frame vibrates with suppressed energy.

This sudden change from snow to fire interests me more than I can say. I take as much delight in trying to thread the mystery of this wonderful woman's mind as an enthusiastic pianist can feel in unravelling the web of a Beethoven sonata, or a crabbed composition by

Sebastian Bach. My whole mind is bent upon the task of finding the secret springs of her action. Those inquiries among the cottagers at Cargill had assuredly something to do with the matter that so absorbs her. Not for nothing would she have been so keenly interested in a casual wayfarer—not for mere charity, were she as charitable as that St. Helena, about whom Mr. Coverdale told me some fairy tales yesterday evening, across the billiard table.

One of the symptoms of this transformation in Lady Penrith is her obvious wish to escape my companionship in her drives.

“I know you prefer going with the shooters, Cora,” she has said, on three several mornings; and thus instigated I have gone with the shooters, for the honourable and Reverend John is game worth stalking, and as he is not so keen a sportsman as the other men—indeed no sportsman at all—I contrive to enjoy a good deal of his society—and I am getting as familiar with the

romance of mediæval saintliness in Rome and in the East—as I am with the characters in Balzac's novels.”

Pleasant as it is, however, to tramp over brown heather and bracken, and tear my pretty tweed frock among the furze bushes, in this enlightening society, yet the very fact of her ladyship not wanting me has determined me to force my company upon her, so yesterday I met her usual remark about the shooters with a flat refusal.

“I am not going with them ever again, aunt, or at any rate not for ages,” I answered. “I daresay they are tired of me, and I know I am tired of them. All my sympathy is with the innocent birds they massacre; and why should I put myself in the way of having my feelings harrowed?”

“Why, indeed?” said my uncle, a remark I might have anticipated from him.

I spoke with some soreness of feeling, for in all that tramping over the dead bracken, and

in all those prosy stories of the saints, the Reverend John has not committed himself to the faintest expression of admiration for me, the sinner. I am as far from the hope of winning his saintly affections as when I played my first game of billiards with him.

“No, Aunt, no more long days with the guns for me,” said I. “If I don’t bore you too much I should like to share your drive this afternoon.”

“Of course you don’t bore me, Cora, but——”

My aunt’s reluctance expressed itself so strongly in that monosyllable as to attract my uncle’s attention. He looked at the speaker suddenly, with keen, cold eyes.

“No doubt your aunt will be very glad to have you,” he said; “she must want your society in those dreary drives of hers more than we do——”

“Except at luncheon,” put in Reggie Mountford, a callow subaltern in the Grenadiers, one of Lady Penrith’s innumerable nephews.

“ We shall miss you awfully with the Irish stew and all that ; you say such awfully good things, regular rowdy things. Oh, you needn’t stare, Mr. Coverdale. The best things she says go over your head ; but Villars and I are in the know, ain’t we, Vill ? ”

Mr. Villars, who might be this flippant brat’s grandfather, assented with a nod. I felt that I had sunk fathoms deep in the estimation of the Churchman ; and I had the pleasure of hearing my uncle’s scornful laugh, as he rose from the breakfast table, with a muttered “ My niece is her father’s daughter.”

After luncheon Lady Penrith informed me, rather coldly, that she was going to Ellerslie for a business interview with her land steward and general adviser, Mr. Orlebar, whom I have heard you speak of not too admiringly. She warned me that I would have a very dull afternoon, as she might be engaged for a long time. I assured her that my delight in seeing the house in which she was born and

brought up would make dulness out of the question.

She was right, however. I endured an afternoon of inexorable dreariness, since the amusement to be found in prowling about a great empty house, and trying her Ladyship's piano, was exhausted in about twenty minutes; and then I had nothing to do but roam in the autumnal garden, count the chrysanthemums, and think over that odious young Mountford's impertinence. My regular rowdy speeches, forsooth! What is the use of having a sharp wit, which seizes the ludicrous aspect of everything? I fear I have been a little weak in letting them talk of French novels and sensational cases in the divorce court before me, and chiming in occasionally. But what can one talk of in this end of the century, if not sensational cases, when every new case goes beyond the old ones in sensational elements?

There is a feeling in the air as if it were not

the end of the century, but the end of the world.

I wandered about, solitary and disconsolate, thinking of only the unpleasantest things, and without so much as a cup of tea. Whatever the house-keeper was doing, she was too busy to think of poor me.

It was past six o'clock when Lady Penrith came to me in the drawing-room, where I was trying to hammer out the one mazurka of Chopin's which had been hammered into me at Madame Michon's and which I now only remember in shreds and patches. The Arts have not been propitious in my case. My musical education was a lamentable failure; and I was never able even to produce the stiff chalk drawing which every pupil at Madame M.'s was supposed to execute, with the aid of bread-crumbs and a patient master. Yet I think for mere brains I might pit myself against most of those underbred girls who used to sneer at my shabby frocks.

Lady Penrith looked ill and miserable when she rejoined me, after her two hours' conversation with her man of business. If their talk had been solely of money matters, one might suppose her on the brink of ruin, but I don't believe financial cares had anything to do with her low spirits.

She scarcely spoke to me in the drive home, and she did not appear at dinner that evening. We were informed before dinner that her ladyship was suffering from a neuralgic headache, and keeping quiet in her own rooms. The maiden aunt, Lady Selina Mountford, a portentous person in a point-lace hood, like Juliet's nurse, had arrived while we were out, and I spent a dismal evening in the shadow of her respectability, not daring to propose an adjournment to the billiard-room, although that impertinent young guardsman asked me to join in a game of pool.

"You can play to me, Miss Urquhart, while

I work," Lady Selina said curtly, with a glance at the open piano.

"Thank you, I don't play," replied I, as curtly as she.

"Indeed! I thought every young lady nowadays was a good pianist."

"There are quite enough of them to make the piano a nuisance, but I happen to be an exception," I retorted, feeling every nerve set on edge by this horrid old woman in a shabby red velvet gown, ensconced in the most comfortable chair—my own pet chair—by the great mediæval fireplace, where rampant brass lions guard a wrought-iron basket of blazing ship's timber, which casts an uncanny green and blue light on people's faces.

Surrounded as we are with coal-pits I need hardly mention that it is the correct thing in a gentleman's house to burn nothing but logs.

Lady Selina settled down to a piece of the ugliest fancy work I ever remember seeing—

a coarse olive-green blanket into which she laboriously dug a huge carpet-needle laden with orange worsted. It was just such a piece of work as one of an African chief's hundred wives might have chosen for the amusement of her leisure hours: altogether hideous and savage.

Perhaps that idea sent my random thoughts in a particular direction.

"This detestable old woman is a Mountford," I said to myself. "She must know something about Brandon Mountford, who wrote the African book."

At any rate there would be some fun in questioning her.

"I think you had an African traveller among your relations some years ago, Lady Selina," said I, squatting on a stool at her feet, as if I loved her.

"Most young men travel in Africa nowadays," she answered. "It is part of a liberal education."

A troubled look had come into her face, and I could see that she was prevaricating with me.

“Ah, but you must know all about this one—a Mr. Brandon Mountford, who wrote a book of travels. Do tell me all about him.”

“There is nothing to tell, except that he was a distant relation of mine, and that he died many years ago.”

“Did he die in Africa?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Her manner was so positively forbidding that I dared not ask another question. She dug her skewer into the green serge—oh, such a bilious colour—as if she would like to dig it into me. She looked like a witch, with the blue and green flames reflected upon her red gown, a horrible lurid figure, a horrible blue-green face.

There is evidently some tragic story to be told about Brandon Mountford—some mis-

fortune, or even disgrace, which involves Lady Penrith. I dare say you know all about it, and will laugh when you read this diary; but when next we meet I shall insist upon your telling me all you know.

I might question the maid who dresses me, and who is most likely to be posted in all scandals affecting the family, but I make it a rule of my life never to be confidential with servants. It doesn't pay. One can't be too distant.

This morning Lady Penrith reappeared, apparently none the worse for yesterday's headache. After breakfast she informed Lady Selina that the barouche would be at her disposal for the morning or the afternoon as she might prefer, and that I would go with her.

"Cora is fond of driving," she said.

"But you'll come, too, I hope, aunt," said I.

"Not to-day, Cora. My aunt will excuse

me. I am going to see some people beyond Ardliston."

"But we could all drive that way," I suggested.

"No; it would not be worth while. I should keep you waiting too long. You can take Lady Selina round by Hanborough Point."

Lady Selina protested that she adored the scenery round Killander Castle, so wild, so deliciously bleak and barren, so unlike Berkshire, where she had just been staying with Mrs. Tilbury St. George, another niece. As the days were growing short she preferred driving in the morning, so behold me, told off to sit and talk twaddle with this odious spinster, who entertained me with an endless web of prosiness about her quarrel with Mrs. Tilbury St. George's maid, who had waited on her, Lady Selina, during her own maid's holiday, and had been guilty of various offences against the ancient spinster's dignity, and had never brought her morning tea before eight o'clock.

“My niece is a fine horsewoman, and hunts four days a week,” concluded Lady Selina, “so one can’t be surprised that there is laxity in her household. She notices the slightest shortcoming in the stables, but doesn’t appear to see things going wrong in her house.”

At luncheon Lady Penrith looked pre-occupied and excited. She left the table with an apology, before her aunt had finished nibbling a bannock with her cheese, and five minutes afterwards I heard her light pony cart drive away.

More inquiries, I suppose, and further afield.

I was not to be beaten, or my curiosity baffled, so easily as her ladyship thought. I determined on a skirmishing round in the direction Lady Penrith had talked of—beyond Ardliston. There are two or three poor little villages within a mile or so of that wretched place. I might gain upon the carriage by a short cut across the moor, and contrive to meet her ladyship, in the most innocent, unpremeditated way.

Those long tramps with the shooters, if they have been no other gain to me, have at least made me a good walker. I am in training for twenty miles a day, and six or seven miles across the moor are as nothing to me. And then what a blessing to escape from Lady Selina, who had established herself again in my favourite chair, by the drawing-room fire, olive green tapestry, and all *en règle*.

Not a word said I to this Medusa, lest she should offer to accompany me, for these active busybodyish old women can sometimes walk as well as the youngest. I slipped out of the drawing-room, found hat and jacket in the hall, and started off at a good four miles an hour, across the hills to Ardliston, where I arrived just in time to see her ladyship's pony-carriage disappear over the crest of a further hill in the direction of Allan Bay.

On one side of the bay there is a miserable village, and a churchyard with two old wind-blown firs, gaunt and distorted, their great

bent arms curving inward as if beckoning the dead from the depths of the sea. "Come here and rest in the calm, quiet earth," they seem to say.

Don't laugh at this dropping into poetry on my part. I am only quoting the Reverend John, who showed me a very pretty water-colour drawing he had made of the churchyard and fir trees, and confided his sentimental notion about these wind-warped branches. He has all the accomplishments—paints charmingly, fiddles a little, knows Beethoven and Mozart as well as I know Balzac and Dumas—and hangs enraptured over Lady Penrith's piano whenever she condescends to play to us poor creatures in the drawing-room, which is not often. She prefers communing with the spirit of melody in the seclusion of her morning-room.

That village over the hill—St. Jude's is the wretched hole's name—is a good seven miles from Ardliston. It was useless for me to

attempt to follow Lady Penrith's carriage. So I crossed the moor again, and walked slowly back, not altogether baffled, for I had at least discovered the direction of her ladyship's drive.

CHAPTER X.

THE CARPEWS HAVE A BOARDER.

THAT village with the old Norman church and the bleak, wind-blown churchyard, where the graves were sometimes washed by the salt white spray from a stormy sea, consisted only of a dozen or so of stone cottages, and the congregation which sparsely occupied the old oaken pews on a Sunday morning and afternoon was mostly made up of smock-frock farmers from the neighbourhood, or an occasional pitman's family, which had come over the hill to afternoon service for the sake of the walk. Poor as the parish was, and few the dwellings it contained, there were a Vicarage and a Vicar—the Vicarage a low, rambling house, with stone

walls and slated roof, over which lichens and stone-crop had spread a friendly covering ; the Vicar an elderly, careworn man, whose shoulders seemed to have bent under the burden of a large family.

This gentleman, with his wife and children, were the only people with any pretence to gentility within a longish walk from the Norman church, and although Mrs. Carpew, the Vicar's wife, had grown worn and wan with domestic cares, and rarely enjoyed ten minutes' leisure between breakfast and bedtime, she had not yet left off lamenting the want of society in the neighbourhood. What leisure or entertainment she could have given to society, or what gowns she could have worn in society, had society been there, was a problem which she had never set herself to work out. She went on lamenting the barrenness of the neighbourhood with a certain lady-like forlornness which secured her the sympathy of friendly farmers' wives, with whom she

occasionally condescended to partake of a substantial north-country tea.

If this poor lady could afford herself one reputable gown and one smart bonnet in which to appear at such homely tea-drinkings she thought herself happy, for there were three growing girls to be clad and shod, and there was an eldest son at Durham, and a second son at Rugby, and two small boys running wild at home whom the Vicar was supposed to teach, so that in the long vacation—very long seemed that vacation to the over-taxed house-mother—there were seven hungry mouths round the Vicarage table, to say nothing of the father and mother, who almost lost all appetite in horror at the amount of food those seven hungry maws consumed.

“A little more beef, please, ma,” “A little more pudding, please, ma.” What a chorus it was! Mrs. Carpew had much need to comfort herself with the vulgar aphorism that it is better to pay butcher and baker than doctor and

chemist—but that consolatory reflection did not tend to make the bills lower.

“If it wasn’t for their boarder the Carpews would never be able to make both ends meet,” said the farmers’ wives, who knew how poor a living this parish of St. Jude’s provided for its pastor.

There was a boarder at the Vicarage, a mysterious gentleman boarder, whose face but few of the neighbours had ever beheld, but whose existence in the house was not made an absolute secret, though it was talked about as little as possible.

“It is beneath your father’s position as Vicar for us to have a boarder; so the less you say about him the better, dears,” Mrs. Carpew told her brood; “he is a poor, afflicted creature, and it is a charity to take care of him.”

The young Carpews were so far of the world worldly as to be able to act upon this maternal counsel. The words “boarder” and “afflicted”

were equally hateful to them, and never passed their lips. "Affliction" in that sense meant to their young minds something revolting and horrible to look upon; and they would have walked miles to avoid meeting the boarder who lived under the same roof with them.

All that these younger members of the family knew of the unseen occupant was that he lived in a portion of the house that had been added by a former vicar, a man of sporting tastes and of larger means than the present incumbent, a squire's son from the Lake District, whose father owned a good deal of property near Keswick, and who could afford to indulge himself with a kennel of shooting dogs, a well-filled gun room, and as many jovial bachelor friends as he cared to entertain in the shooting season; altogether a very different type of man from Ebenezer Carpew, who had struggled out of the dismal swamp of Nonconformity into the loftier atmosphere of the Church of England, *viâ*

Durham, and who had never recovered from the effects of the struggle.

The wing added to the Vicarage early in the century by the bachelor parson, consisted of four good-sized rooms affording ample accommodation for an afflicted gentleman, even if he were, as the neighbours insisted, a sprig of nobility. Four rooms, locked off from the rest of the house, were reserved for the unknown; and it was the popular idea that the unknown was not right in his mind, and had been confided to Mr. Carpew's care by his relatives; not right, but not so wrong as to render his residence in Mr. Carpew's house absolutely illegal.

St. Jude's Vicarage was so remote from civilization—such a lonely and isolated nook along that bleak Cumbrian coast, that questions which might have been asked in any other neighbourhood were not asked here. The village of St. Jude was less than three miles from Allan Bay, and while prosecuting her inquiries among the little group of fishermen's cottages clustered on

one side of the bay, Lady Penrith heard of the mysterious inmate of St. Jude's Vicarage, but beyond the mere fact of his existence, her informant could tell her nothing.

"Nobody ever sees him," said a fisherman's wife, who was aunt to the servant girl at the Vicarage. "Mr. and Mrs. Carpew wait upon him themselves, the girl told me; take him his food, and clean his rooms, and look after him. They're too poor to keep a servant on purpose; and the girl—it was my own niece, Mary Martin—she was over two years at the Vicarage, and never see him in all the time—said Mrs. Carpew told her she was to hold her tongue, and say nothing about him to nobody, and she didn't, except to me, and two or three others as she'd known from a baby."

"What kind of man is Mr. Carpew?" Lady Penrith asked, thoughtfully.

"Well, your ladyship, he's what I should call a poor creature. There's no grit in him—he's regular broke down with trouble and care—

all those hungry boys and girls to feed, and always in debt to the butcher or baker. They say the living ain't worth more than a hundred and seventy pounds a year, all told—and there's nine in the family—the youngsters all growing up and hearty—and a servant girl makes ten. Poor Mrs. Carpew works her fingers to the bone sewing, and helping with the housework. If ever there was a white slave she's one, poor lady—but I think she's got more spirit than the Vicar, and bears up better."

"Does nobody help them?"

"The farmers' wives, they helps a bit, with a couple o' chicken now and then, or a pound or two of butter and a score of eggs; but that don't go far. There's no gentry near enough to take any interest; and they're not like regular poor folks, you see, my lady. They can't ask for help, or else I daresay they would have asked up at the Castle, for it was the old lord who gave Mr. Carpew the living, such as it is."

“His lordship’s father? That must have been a long time ago.”

“Yes, my lady, it must be nigh upon five-and-twenty years. Mr. Carpew was tutor at the Castle before Lord Ardliston and his brother went to college. Ah, he used to have fine times then, poor gentleman! His back was straight enough in those days, and he was quite smart in his dress, and held himself ever so high. Life was a’most all pleasure for him then. He used to racket about at all the race-meetings in the neighbourhood with the young lord and his brother. He’s not as old a man as you’d think, looking at him now, and I don’t believe that he’s more than six or seven years older than Lord Penrith.”

“And they were great friends, no doubt, he and his pupils?”

“Oh yes, they was very good friends; him and Mr. Urquhart in particular. His lordship was always high, my lady, even when he was Lord Ardliston; but Mr. Urquhart, he allus

made more free with folks, and he and Mr. Carpew was a good deal about together. They say the Vicar was a great scholar in those days. He'd been helped on at college because of his talents, and people said the Earl was lucky to find such a man in the neighbourhood, ready to his hand. Mr. Carpew's father was a Dissenting minister at Workington—a small tradesman that had taken to preaching in a little chapel up a back lane—so you may suppose it wasn't no easy matter for him to send his son to Durham College."

"How long has the person your niece spoke about been at the Vicarage?" asked Lady Penrith, after a thoughtful silence.

"Ah, that's more than I can say, my lady. I don't suppose anyone knows when he came there, or that anyone see him come, but he's been there a long while."

"Twenty years?"

"I can't say, my lady. It's four years or more since Mary told me about him, and she

was at the Vicarage going on for three years, and he was there all the time, though she never laid eyes on him ; and that's all I know."

"Do you think there is anyone here or at St. Jude's who knows more about him ?"

"No, I don't, my lady, for we've talked it over among ourselves, here and up at St. Jude's, and if there'd been anything more to hear I should have heard it. They've kept it all very close, the Carpews have ; but we all know that if the Vicar didn't get a little money beyond his wage as parson his family must have gone hungry sometimes."

When Coralie saw the pony-carriage disappear over the crest of the hill Lady Penrith was on her way to St. Jude's, to make a formal call at the Vicarage. That seemed the simplest manner of approaching the Carpew mystery in the first place, and she put a strain upon herself to suppress all signs of agitation, and to appear with the manner of a person interested

only in a case of possible distress. The mysterious message delivered to her on the moor was a sufficient excuse for pushing her inquiries to the furthest limits, and as the wife of the patron of the living she was at least entitled to respect from the Vicar and his family.

Her first attempt was baffled by Mrs. Carpew's abject terror of being discovered in her untidy parlour and her worse than shabby gown. The pair of Iceland ponies, neat little cart, and smart groom had been visible to the Vicar's wife from the windows of her bedroom, where she had been engaged the whole afternoon, in a favourite species of occupation which she called a good turn out, and which involved the emptying of drawers and closets, old trunks and old bandboxes, and the piling up of shabby raiment on the bed, a proceeding lengthened out by the minutest investigation of said raiment, and much discussion with her eldest daughter—now old enough to be admitted to

the strictly feminine rites of the turn out—as to the possible rehabilitation of certain garments which had been put by as hopeless, or the conversion of last year's finery to this year's fashion—the fashion as known at St. Jude's, which was two years behind London, and fifteen months behind Edinburgh.

From an open window mother and daughter saw the Penrith pony-carriage approaching.

“It's Lady Penrith,” cried Miss Carpew. “I saw her driving those ponies the last time I was at Ardliston. To think of her coming to call on us after all these years, and we not fit to be seen. Do be quick, ma, and wash your face, and smooth your hair. You look dreadful, and so do I,” glancing at her own heated countenance in the cloudy glass on the littered dressing-table.

“Gertrude, we can't see her,” exclaimed Mrs. Carpew. “It's out of the question. The boys are in the drawing-room. Luke and Jack were playing double dummy, and Joe was washing

Snapper in a tub by the fire. He will wash that dog in the drawing-room. Run down to Sarah and say not at home."

"It seems a pity," faltered Gertrude, lingering on the threshold. "If we say not at home to-day she may never come again. And she may have come to ask us to a party."

"Not she. What, after her being at the Castle off and on nearly ten years? She's only come to bother about some of the poor people, I daresay. Perhaps to complain of something—to find fault with your father for not going to see them when they're ill—miles and miles on a winter night. Run, Gerty, this instant," cried the Vicar's wife, almost hysterically, as the grinding of the wheels drew near upon the hard chalk road;—"as if he could go out on cold nights, with his asthma," concluded Mrs. Carpew grumblingly, to the empty air.

Gertrude rushed downstairs, three steps at

a time, after her manner, and reached the kitchen passage just as the groom rang the bell.

“Not at home—nobody at home,” she gasped to the maid-of-all-work. “Wipe your face as you go along the passage, do, for goodness’ sake. It’s all over blacks.”

Gerty dropped into a chair by the fire as the girl hurried out—scrubbing her dirty face with an apron as dirty—and burst into tears.

“How horrid it all is—how hard,” she moaned. “To be obliged to hide from well-dressed people, as if one was a murderer. I wish I was in one of the colonies where there are no fine ladies—no pony-carriages—nothing to belittle one and make one feel wretched. I wish I was dead—or married to Steve Maltby.”

Stephen Maltby was the son of a small tenant farmer, whose comfortable homestead Mrs. Carpew visited condescendingly, and whose

honourable advances to Miss Carpew had been flouted by her parents.

“If you want to sink into the class out of which I raised myself by the most strenuous toil, you had better marry Stephen Maltby,” said the Vicar severely.

Gertrude felt in her heart of hearts that she had better marry Stephen, without any retrospective considerations; but she submitted as a dutiful daughter. Stephen was tall and good-looking, but his hair was decidedly sandy; and she was not so much in love with him as to defy father and mother for his sake. So she told herself that wretched as life was at the Vicarage she did not want to lose caste, and to sink to the level of a tenant-farmer's wife.

She heard the hall door shut, and the slow, slipshod feet of Sarah returning along the passage. The Vicarage spread itself over a good deal of ground, and the drawing-room where the Vicar's sons were playing whist was

at the opposite extremity to those additional rooms which the sporting Vicar of fifty years before had built on the east side of the house, abutting on the walled garden of about an acre. This garden, with its fir trees and shrubberied walk on one side, and its old apple trees, rose bushes, and asparagus beds, on the other had been the pleasure and the pride of the previous Vicar and his wife ; but Mrs. Carpew was too harassed and hard driven by the stress of daily care to take pride in anything, and Mr. Carpew seemed to have lost all interest in life except a feeble concern as to what horse was likely to win any great race, a subject he would discuss with his sons or his neighbours, with a faint revival of human feeling. For the rest he was like a man whose spirit had gone out of him years before, and who only moved about automatically, a mind-less, nerveless body.

“What did she say ?” asked Gerty, meeting Sarah at the kitchen door.

“She seemed regular put out when I told her there wasn’t nobody at home. She asked first for the Vicar, and then for Missus, and then was there any member of the family as she could see, and I says no—they was every one of ’em out. And then she asked when Master and Missus was likely to be at home, and I says to-morrow afternoon, for, thinks I, if Missus knows beforehand she can get things a bit straight.”

“Yes, yes, of course. That was very sensible of you, Sarah.”

“And then she says she will come to-morrow, at about three o’clock; so now you know what you’ve got to do, Miss Gertrude, and there mustn’t be no washing dogs in the drawing-room.”

“No, nor yet those horrid cards—as if the evening wasn’t long enough for whist, when they can have me and Lilian instead of double dummy.”

“Lady Penrith must have made up her mind

to know us," mused the Vicar's daughter, as she ran up to her garret bedroom to take a last look at her ladyship's pony cart. "Perhaps she has heard how hard it is for us to live here, without any society, and means to be our friend."

She opened her lattice and put her head out into the autumn wind. There was no sign of the pony cart, not even a cloud of dust in the direction where she first looked, and then sweeping the landscape, her eyes descried groom and ponies stationed a little way off, in the opposite direction, eastward, towards the Scottish border, and, behold, the pony cart was empty.

Gerty ran to another dormer at the east end of the house, which commanded garden and common land beyond, and from this look-out she beheld Lady Penrith standing far off, on the steep heather-clad slope which rose outside the garden wall, evidently looking at the house and its surroundings. Gerty watched her for

ten minutes or so, and saw her walking slowly about the hillside, and looking from time to time at the Vicarage, while Gerty, fearful of being seen at her post of observation, screened herself behind the faded chintz curtain.

CHAPTER XI.

CORALIE'S PRIVATE JOURNAL.

It is three days since I sent my father the latest chapter in my critical and exhaustive study of Lady Penrith, and I really thought I had done my work so carefully and so well as to deserve praise even from him. But not one word of acknowledgment have I yet received, and if I had not taken the trouble to register my little packet I might think that my manuscript had gone astray. I have guarded against even this contingency, for in the copy I made for paternal perusal I used ciphers instead of proper names, enclosing a key to those ciphers in a separate letter. My original journal I keep for my own amusement in days

to come, when my life at Killander Castle will be but a memory—a memory to prose about perhaps to girls who will be as weary of me as I am of Lady Selina and her long, rambling stories of her innumerable nieces and their splendours.

“My sisters all married well, and I might have married as well as any of them,” she explained to me yesterday. “The newspaper people used to write about us as the beautiful Mountfords, and at my age I needn’t mind saying that though I was the eldest I was by no means the plainest of the sisters.”

Indeed she needn’t mind, for there isn’t a trace of that youthful beauty left in her wrinkled old countenance; so she may prate of the conquests and triumphs of the Lady Selina of those days without being accused of egotism.

I was home an hour earlier than Lady Penrith the day before yesterday, and had the felicity of pouring out Lady Selina’s tea, a burden

which was somewhat relieved by the Reverend John's appearance in the drawing-room. He had left the shooters on the moors.

"You were tired of killing innocent little birds, I suppose," said I.

"No more tired than you are of eating them, Miss Urquhart," he answered.

This was rather crushing, as he had seen me demolish the best part of a cold grouse at breakfast that morning.

"Oh, I am strictly utilitarian there," answered I; "when once they are killed they may as well be eaten."

He looked round the room with a disappointed air, I thought.

"What has become of Lady Penrith—not another headache, I hope?" he said.

"There was not nearly so much talk of headache when I was a young woman," said Lady Selina.

I explained that my aunt had gone for a long solitary drive, and then, with my own hands,

I carried that starched parson his cup of tea, after I had put a sweet little Vernis-Martin table by the side of his chair. I pampered him with cream and muffin, until the primly pious creature looked up with a chilly smile and said, "If I were a Mussulman this would be my idea of Paradise, Miss Urquhart. A low, easy chair, and a nice young lady to give me my tea."

"Yet, when you missed Lady Penrith just now you looked round the room as if it were a blank," said I.

Would you believe it, my dear Letts, the creature blushed to the roots of his nice wavy hair—like an iceberg crimsoned by the setting sun?

"Lady Penrith's absence must leave a blank wherever people are accustomed to see her," he answered, as the blush faded, leaving him in his usual iced-cucumber condition.

Trying to please a man of his temperament is like punishment labour—the hardest form

of human toil—with the conviction that it is all wasted effort. Yes, I think I would sooner turn the crank than try to fascinate the reverend and honourable John. Yet plain women have achieved even greater successes. I know of plain Peeresses—who had no money-bags to counterbalance blunt features and dull complexions—plain millionairesses, who have married millionaires on the strength of being plump and comfortable looking. Let me remember this, and go on trying. After all I have nothing else to do in this fortress on the Marches except to watch Lady Penrith, and it is in a woman's nature—especially a plain woman's—to try hard for any great catch in the matrimonial line that circumstances may throw in her way.

Circumstances have thrown Mr. Coverdale in my way, and I should be a fool not to do my uttermost to improve the occasion.

No more rowdy talk in the billiard-room. I feel angry with my father for having told me

so much of the club smoke-room slang. He never told me anything really bad, but just those touch-and-go stories that give zest to conversation among men and women of the world, yet which are of a kind to disgust this High Church Puritan. I shall devote to-morrow morning to fishing out the biographies of saints in the "Encyclopedia," and in the evening I'll read Newman's "Apologia" or Montalembert's "Monks of the West."

The mystery thickens. To you only, dear Letts, could I confide my adventures of this afternoon. It has been a day of surprises.

The first occurred at the breakfast table, when Lady Penrith, who is generally reticence itself about her own doings, thoughts, and fancies, and who rarely initiates any conversation with my uncle, began to talk to him about her drive of yesterday.

"I took the Icelanders further than usual," she said, "but they did their work capitally.

They are dear little things, and I am very much obliged to you for them, Penrith."

The Iceland ponies are a recent present from my lord to my lady — a kind of set-off against the thousand or so of her money which he paid for the hire of a grouse moor in Argyleshire.

"I'm glad you like them," answered that human iceberg.

Curious to find two such men as my uncle Penrith and Mr. Coverdale under one roof. Yet they wear their ice with a difference. I suspect the parson of hidden fires, but I believe his Lordship frozen to the core.

"I went as far as St. Jude's. I wanted very much to see the Vicar's wife, for I have heard a saddening account of their poverty. However, there was no one at home, so I had my drive for nothing."

Her manner of watching her husband's face as she said this convinced me that there was some serious motive for her speech; and that

she was trying the effect of certain allusions upon his Lordship.

“It was a pity you gave yourself the trouble,” he answered carelessly. “The Vicar of St. Jude’s is no poorer than a hundred other parish priests scattered about the country in villages as solitary and wretched.”

“The living is yours, I am told.”

“Yes, the living is mine, but I can’t make it any better than it is. Carpew was very glad to get it when my father gave it to him.”

“He hoped it was only the beginning, I suppose. He could hardly think it would be the end.”

“I believe it’s his own fault that he’s still at St. Jude’s. He’s a lazy vagabond, who would rather vegetate than work. He shirked all trouble, I remember, when he was my tutor; though he came to us with a great reputation for mathematics. He was always glad to do as little work as possible, and Hubert and I would

have preferred doing none, so we were very good friends. He and Hubert were tremendous chums, indeed—for Hubert always liked low company.”

“Low company! A famous mathematician,” exclaimed my aunt.

“Mathematics won’t turn a cad into a gentleman,” answered my uncle, lifting his eyebrows. “His people were small shopkeepers, Primitive Methodists, or something of that kind. The poor wretch had struggled out of the mire—and now I suppose he has slipped back into it. I have not seen him—to my knowledge—for the last ten years.”

“Do you know anything about his wife?” asked my aunt, still watchful of her husband’s face.

“I remember hearing that she was the daughter of an adjutant of a line regiment, and by way of being immensely genteel. Poor creature. Her gentility must have rusted and mildewed in twenty years at St. Jude’s.”

“Have the Carpews been twenty years at St. Jude’s?”

“More than twenty. My father gave him the living before Cora was born. I remember my brother begging the berth for him, and it was before Hubert’s marriage.”

Now this was one of the longest conversations I ever heard between this lady and gentleman. They are always civil to each other before company; courteous even; but it is the rarest thing for them to talk to each other as if they had an interest in common.

After luncheon, Lady Penrith again informed me that she was going for a long drive alone, and suggested the barouche for her aunt and me. I was spared that infliction, as Lady Selina had acquired a fine cold in the head, one of those colds which inflict keener suffering upon the spectator than upon the patient, and which I believe to be distinctly infectious, whatever doctors may say to the contrary. As

she insisted upon nursing this horrid complaint by the drawing-room fire I deserted that room for the afternoon, and started for a long walk, first with the idea of getting a glimpse of her ladyship's Icelanders going or returning, and secondly because fresh air and exercise will help me to maintain at least a clear complexion, if not a beautiful one.

Now, my good Letts, comes surprise number two. I walked across the moor to Ardliston, and in the long, straggling street of that bleak wind-blown village, whom should I meet but my very own father !

Yes, my father, who has always expressed his hatred of this part of the world, and has congratulated himself that while his brother was born at the Castle, Berkeley Square had been thought good enough for him, the younger son ; so that he was not called upon to feel any affection for Cumberland as his native soil. There in front of the Higginson Arms whom should I see but that very father of mine !

He did not seem particularly pleased to see me. Indeed, I may say that his manner was strictly paternal.

“Come inside, Coralie; I want a few minutes’ talk with you,” said he, after the first brief greetings; and then he led the way into the inn—hotel, forsooth, on the signboard—and into a wretched parlour, where the decorations comprised a magenta table-cover that hurt my eyes after the cool, harmonious tints of the autumnal sea and sky, a pair of cut-glass lustres on the mantelpiece, and a fearful and wonderful composition in gaudily coloured shells under a glass shade on the side-board.

“There isn’t a chair in the room fit to sit in,” said my father with a vindictive shove to an American-cloth-covered monstrosity, into which he flung himself, leaving me to perch where I liked.

“Are you here for long?” I asked.

“No. Possibly not more than twenty-four hours.”

“Oh! You received my manuscript, I suppose.”

“Oh yes, that came to hand. You have the pen of a ready writer, Cora. You ought to do something in literature, by-and-by.”

“And my manuscript brought you here, I suppose?” said I, ignoring the paternal praise.

He did not condescend to answer.

“Lady Penrith drove through the place half an hour ago. Do you know where she is going?” he asked presently.

“I have a shrewd suspicion,” said I; and then I told him of the conversation at the breakfast-table, watching his face meanwhile as keenly as Lady Penrith watched her husband.

Whether my father is less master of himself than the Earl, or whether he had more reason to be concerned, I know not, but his countenance betrayed intense anxiety. He started out of the odious, sticky chair, and walked to the window, where he stood looking into the street for some minutes.

“Curious, this sudden interest in the Carpews,” said he, after a long silence, and with a very poor attempt at careless speech.

I should have given my father credit for being a better actor, but I fear that pegs and late hours are beginning to tell upon him. He has aged considerably since I left school, and looks older than my uncle Penrith.

“Yes, it is rather curious, ain’t it?” I answered. “I believe it all springs from her insane anxiety to trace that wretched lunatic who accosted her on the moor. Can you conceive any reason for this interest in a half-witted peasant?”

“Yes; the strongest of all reasons,” he answered bitterly; “she is a woman, and women love to make molehills into mountains. Now, listen to me, Cora. I am here on business—business of importance. You can understand that, as you know I loathe the place, and am ill friends with my brother. Not a word about your having seen me here to any living

creature, gentle or simple. I shall vanish as suddenly as I came. Last night's mail brought me; to-night's mail may probably take me back to London. Go on with your journal. It is capital practice for your pen. You are cultivating exactly that pert pessimism which readers like nowadays. The task is so good for you as a literary exercise that I won't even thank you for doing it. Indeed, you ought to thank me for putting it upon you to do."

"Bravo!" cried I, "that's an easy way of escaping the sense of obligation."

"Go on with your journal. Keep a strict watch upon her ladyship. Don't be afraid of being diffuse. Note the smallest details, and send me your report every day, or twice a day if there is anything serious to report."

"There can be no further doubt as to my position," said I. "This is secret police work."

"It is work that may save your father from a great danger, and you from the risk of the disadvantages that his disgrace must entail

upon you," answered my father, sternly. "I won't trifle with you any longer, Coralie. This is a matter of life and death—life or death to reputation, I mean."

He was almost livid, and his lower lip worked in an agitated way when he left off speaking.

There must be something very serious behind this anxiety. I saw him wipe the beads of perspiration from his forehead, though the room, with its wretched turf fire, felt damp and chilly. There must be something very serious in my father's past history—something which nearly touches Lady Penrith. I am devoured with curiosity, yet dare not ask any questions of anyone about the past, lest I should excite suspicion and injure him. He is my father, after all; and, as he tells me, any discredit to him must reflect discredit upon me.

I must be loyal to him, however disloyal I may be to my uncle's wife.

"And now, good-bye to you, Cora," said my father, after looking out of the window again

for some minutes. “You’d better get on with your walk. There’s not a mortal in sight, and you can slip out of the house without anyone knowing that you’ve been in it.”

The parlour was close to the inn door. He just touched my forehead with his hot, dry lips, and put me across the threshold.

One o’clock. This habit of diary-writing grows upon me, and I am shortening my hours of rest; but what is the use of beauty-sleep when one has no beauty?

CHAPTER XII.

“ SO WE BUT MEET NOT PART AGAIN.”

MRS. CARPEW and her daughter toiled all the morning in the expectation of their aristocratic visitor. They could have very little help from Sarah, the maid-of-all-work, who had her hands full with the every-day work of the family—scrubbing floors, peeling potatoes, making beds, carrying water, cooking the poor little bit of meat that had to be eked out with much plain pudding and home-grown vegetables. All Sarah could do in the cleaning of the drawing-room was to come with her worn-out carpet-broom and sweep, raising such a mighty dust in the process that it might have seemed almost wiser not to sweep.

When Sarah had swept, Mrs. Carpew and her daughter began to tidy; and tidying the Vicarage drawing-room was a work that ought to have ranked almost as high as the labours of Hercules. The mother went about the business in a desultory way, murmuring complaints against fate and her own children as she worked. Were there ever such untidy boys—cards here, dominoes there, pipes everywhere—and such pipes! It made her sick to touch them. What would her mother, whose drawing-room, under the difficulties of barrack life, was always refined and artistic, think if she could see such a room as this?

“But then my mother had only me,” sighed Mrs. Carpew.

“Well, mother, I suppose you’d hardly like to see all of us reduced to one girl,” said Gertrude, who was working briskly and steadily, cleaning corners, polishing the shabby old Chippendale chairs that the Vicar had bought cheap at a farmhouse auction, going for a

mere song because of their old-fashioned shape, before anybody in that remote world knew that such chairs were things of beauty—shaking the dust out of the window curtains, bringing the blacklead brush, and giving an extra polish to the old iron grate. Gertrude stopped at nothing that could improve the aspect of that shabby old room.

“But it really don’t seem much good doing anything unless one could whitewash the ceiling and re-paper the walls,” she said, looking round despondingly, after nearly two hours’ hard work. “That horrid paper was a triumph of ugliness to begin with, and dirt hasn’t improved it.”

Mother and daughter dined sketchily at one o’clock with the depressed father and the hungry lads and lasses, who reduced the shoulder of mutton to so bare a bone that it promised badly for a grill for the Vicar’s breakfast—“especially if Sarah is to dine off it,” he remarked discontentedly.

Mrs. Carpew reassured him. Sarah was dining on a dumpling. Any scraps of meat served to make Sarah a dumpling.

The younger girls were excited at the idea of Lady Penrith's visit.

"Shall we see her?" asked Hilda, who came next to Gertrude, but was not considered "out."

"Certainly not," replied Gerty. "Look at your frock—positively disgraceful."

"Shall we see her, ma?" repeated Hilda, scorning the sisterly reply.

"Of course not. You and Ethel have treated those nice alpacas shamefully."

"They never were nice," grumbled Ethel. "They are the most hideous frocks you could have chosen."

"What is all this about Lady Penrith?" asked the Vicar, looking up from his plate to mix in a conversation which he usually ignored. "Is she coming here?"

"Yes; at three o'clock this afternoon."

"What for?"

"Why, to pay us a visit, of course. I daresay she has heard that Gertrude is growing up, and sympathises with our want of society."

"Gertrude has society enough when she is marching about the place with Stephen Maltby," grumbled the Vicar. "Society, forsooth. I'd swop the best society in Cumberland for a five-pound note."

The sons laughed; the daughters sat in dumb disgust. They had imbibed all their mother's ideas about society; had heard thrilling stories of the gaiety of garrison towns, regimental dances, archery meetings, a brilliant world in which their mother's girlhood had been spent, a dazzling sphere inaccessible for them. Gertrude would have sacrificed five years of her life for one garrison ball, if Mephistopheles had offered her the opportunity.

"I can't understand Lady Penrith coming to this house," said the Vicar, with a troubled

look. "She can want nothing here but to pry and spy."

"I suppose you can't conceive the possibility of her wanting to see ma and me," retorted his eldest daughter haughtily.

"No, I can't," answered the Vicar, with paternal candour.

Dinner concluded under a cloud, not a much heavier cloud than usually enveloped the family meal—for there was seldom a dinner that went from start to finish without trouble of some kind, trouble about underdone meat or overdone meat, watery vegetables, cold gravy; trouble about insolent rejoinders from the boys, possibly not meant to be insolent—Mrs. Carpew insisted that in meaning they were as doves—which provoked the father's wrath. Trouble, trouble, boiled and bubbled every day in the cauldron of life at St. Jude's Vicarage.

To-day Gertrude sacrificed her share in the sloppy rice pudding in order to make her toilette in good time for the expected visit; and at

a quarter to three Mrs. Carpew and daughter were seated in the drawing-room, employed in some genteelly useless needlework, and trying to look as if they sat there every afternoon. The odour of dogs and tobacco had been subjugated by widely opened windows, and the room was really tidy. Sarah had been instructed as to the bringing of afternoon tea, and urged to serve it with more style than she had ever done for the farmers' wives.

“Suppose she doesn't come after all our trouble,” speculated Gerty, watching the road from the bow window.

“I couldn't suppose her guilty of anything so unladylike.”

“Oh, well, I don't know. It would be just like our luck if she didn't turn up, after all. Oh, there she comes. I can see those heavenly mouse-grey ponies. Dear little things. I wonder if Sarah has come downstairs?”

Gertrude ran to the kitchen to assure herself. Yes, Sarah was there, dressed as she was rarely

dressed at that hour, in her Sunday stuff gown, clean apron, and cap. And the tea-tray was ready on the kitchen table, and there were tea-cakes baking.

“She’s coming! Look sharp, Sarah,” said Gerty, and then flew back to the drawing-room, and took up her crewel work once more.

“Lady Penrith,” announced the maid-of-all-work.

How handsome, how graceful in form and movement; how simply dressed. Gerty wondered at the plain cloth gown, whose only merit was the perfection with which the severely-cut bodice fitted the finely-proportioned figure. Only a rough brown cloth. This mistress of many thousands a year was more plainly attired than a farmer’s wife in her Sunday gown. But Gerty felt instinctively that the cloth gown and neat little felt hat were just the right things for a country drive on a dull autumn day, and she had the felicity later of seeing and even handling the long seal-

skin coat which her ladyship had left in the hall.

"This is quite too kind of you, dear Lady Penrith," exclaimed Mrs. Carpew, with a reminiscence of garrison manners. "It is such a pleasure to my daughter and me to become acquainted with you personally, after hearing your praises so perpetually."

"You are very good, and I am very glad to know you and Miss Carpew," Sibyl replied graciously, and then, with an earnest look and grave voice, she continued, "I must not sail under false colours. I had a very serious purpose in coming here to-day."

"A bazaar," thought the Vicar's wife, "and she wants us to work for it. Just like these fine ladies. They never take anyone up without a motive."

Mrs. Carpew was quite willing to be "taken up," if the price to be paid were not too high.

"I want to enlist your sympathy for myself,

and for one who is very dear to me, and who is, I have reason to believe, a dweller under this roof."

Mrs. Carpew started, flushed, and then slowly paled.

"I don't understand."

"You don't understand the link between me and the poor afflicted gentleman who lives under your charge," said Sibyl, looking intently into the weak, commonplace countenance. "Pray be frank with me. How long has this gentleman been with you?"

Mrs. Carpew hesitated, stammered an inaudible word or two, in evident distress.

"I really don't know," she faltered, after that embarrassed pause. "I can't tell you anything about him. He is in my husband's care. I never interfere. The Vicar took him from benevolent motives, I believe—to oblige an old friend. Of course we are paid something for his maintenance—we are too poor to dispense with payment—but not nearly so

much as would have to be paid anywhere else."

"To oblige an old friend," repeated Sibyl; "yes, that is just as I thought. But, think, now, Mrs. Carpew—you must remember how long he has been here?"

"Indeed, Lady Penrith, I do not. One year is so like another in this dull place."

"But you can surely fix the date of an important event like that—a stranger coming under your roof. And then you have a living calendar in your children—their ages would tell you."

"I remember, ma," interjected Gertrude, who had listened with keenest curiosity, and who rushed into the conversation, unconscious of her mother's frowns. "It was the year Bobby was born. You hadn't left your room—he was a tiny, tiny baby—and one morning old nurse Bond told me there'd been a fine to-do in the night, and two gentlemen had arrived from London—by the mail train—and one of

them wasn't right in his mind, and he was to stay."

"It was a stormy night?" suggested Sibyl.

"Yes, it was a stormy night, and one of them was wet to the skin, and nurse Bond had to light a fire—she told me all about it in the morning," added Gertrude eagerly, and then for the first time became aware of her mother's warning scowl.

What had she done? Mischief, perhaps. She had been expressly forbidden to talk of the mysterious boarder. Her mother's white face and distracted look smote her with sudden terror.

"Mrs. Carpew, I appeal to you as woman to woman," said Sibyl, with clasped hands, and a voice that thrilled both listeners, such depth of earnestness was in its tone. "Let me see this person. He may not be the person I think, but if he is I would sacrifice half my fortune to look upon his face again, and to give him help and comfort in his affliction. You

shall be no losers, you and your husband, for doing me that kindness. You shall, indeed, be greatly the gainers. You know that I am rich, and you may suppose I would not count the cost where—where my affection was concerned. I firmly believe that the person in your care is a kinsman of mine, one whom I loved years ago, before Lord Penrith asked me to be his wife. I am quite frank with you. I keep nothing back from you or from your daughter, for I can see that she sympathises with me."

"Indeed I do," interjected Gertrude.

"And I don't think you can refuse me your sympathy. Let me see him, if only for five minutes, and then, among us all, the Vicar, and you, and I, we may arrange some plan for making his life happier. Only let me see him, let me be sure he is the man I am looking for."

"What could possibly make you suppose that he is your relation, Lady Penrith?" Mrs.

Carpew asked, her countenance expressing a conflict of ideas in a brain that afforded very little room for the struggle.

“A letter in his own hand.”

“A letter. How could he send a letter? He has not written to anybody for years. He has no messenger.”

“He has written to me; he has found a messenger,” answered Sibyl, “out of the depths—out of the depths,” she repeated to herself. “Woman, for God’s sake, show that you have a woman’s heart,” she cried passionately, losing all patience with the flabby creature before her.

“Yes, ma, do. If you’ve any more feeling in you than a bran pincushion,” put in Gerty, indignantly.

“It is such a small thing that I am asking. Only to see him for a few minutes.”

The tears were streaming down Sibyl’s pale cheeks. Gertrude with difficulty refrained from hitting her mother.

"It is not a small thing. It is a very big thing. No one is allowed to see him—not even my own children. I appeal to Gertrude."

"Don't appeal to me. I hate you," cried her rebellious daughter.

"If I wished ever so—and indeed, dear Lady Penrith, I do sympathise with you—I couldn't let you see him. That part of the house—he has quite the best rooms in the Vicarage—is locked off, and the Vicar keeps the key. It would be impossible, if I wished ever so—and I do wish——"

"For gracious sake don't go on rambling like that," cried Gerty. "You can ask pa, I suppose. If he does keep the door locked he can give you the key. He's not a Bluebeard."

"Yes, yes, I can ask him," faltered Mrs. Carpew, as if catching at an escape from present perplexity. "I will ask him, Lady Penrith. You may be sure I will do all in my power to accomplish what you wish. But, indeed, I believe you are labouring under a

delusion. In the first place our poor friend could not possibly have communicated with you."

"I tell you he has communicated with me. Mrs. Carpew, for pity's sake don't beat about the bush. You say you will ask your husband. Go and ask him—or bring him here and let me plead my own cause. I feel assured he will hear reason."

"He is out," answered Mrs. Carpew.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure. I saw him go out—half an hour ago."

The latter part of the speech was a falsehood. Mrs. Carpew had seen her husband creeping past the bow window, with furtive glances at the occupants of the drawing-room, only five minutes before, and she knew that the Vicar had been, in her domestic language, "on the listen."

The Vicar might be "on the listen" still, perhaps, outside the drawing-room door. In

any case it would not do for his wife to compromise him. There must be time for consideration. She hoped that he would see his way to serving Lady Penrith rather than that other person who rewarded them so scantily for watchful care and service. She hoped, but she felt that supreme caution was necessary upon her part.

"How long will he be out?" asked Sibyl, impatiently. "I can wait."

"He is so very uncertain," answered Mrs. Carpew, with a warning look at her daughter. "He may be away for hours. This is such an immense parish—so poor and so few people, but stretching over such a lot of ground. He may have gone to one of the furthest farm-houses ; and he is a slow walker."

At this point the tea-tray bumped against the door, which was opened rather awkwardly by the bearer of the tray. Sarah sailed in, and began to spread a very smart tea-cloth—an unsold item in a sale of work for parochial

purposes, which had lapsed as a perquisite to the Vicar's wife.

"I will wait," said Lady Penrith. "Perhaps you would kindly put up my ponies for an hour or so."

"I am so sorry," apologised Mrs. Carpew. "We have only a two-stall stable, and as we keep no conveyance, the boys have filled both stalls with their rabbit hutches——"

"And the stable smells — too dreadful," ejaculated Gerty.

"Never mind, I see the groom has put their rugs on," said Lady Penrith, who had been looking out of the window; "and they are very hardy. I should like to wait for the Vicar's return, Mrs. Carpew, if I am not in your way?"

"In my way, dear Lady Penrith? How can you suggest such a thing?" exclaimed the Vicar's wife, her garrison manner struggling with secret agonies.

Gertrude, who had heard that it was the

right thing for the daughter of the house to pour out the tea, had seated herself at the tray, a position she was wont to seize on state occasions, in defiance of her mother.

"I'll slip out and inquire if the Vicar has left word where he has gone," said Mrs. Carpew, making for the door. "Perhaps he may not have gone to any of his distant parishioners after all."

She had disappeared from the drawing-room before anyone could reply. She hurried along a passage—looked into the Vicar's den. It was empty. She hurried across a lobby, went up three steps, and knocked at the door which divided the new wing from the original building. It was an additional door, which had been put there within the last ten years—a heavy door, covered with green baize, shutting with a steel spring.

She knocked twice before the door was opened by the Vicar himself.

"Well, has she gone?"

“No. She is waiting for you. Oh, there has been such a scene. I feel so sorry for her.”

And then, standing just within the green baize door, Mrs. Carpew related her conversation with Lady Penrith.

“Cream—and sugar?” inquired Gertrude, smiling across the table at her guest, as she poured out the tea.

Sibyl was too agitated to answer the trivial question.

“Now we are alone let me thank you for your sympathy,” she said. “I know you are a good, warm-hearted girl, and if you will help me—as I feel sure you can—you shall find that I am not ungrateful. You—well, you shall have something better than rabbits in your stable.”

“Oh, please, please don’t think me mercenary; don’t think that I am influenced by the idea of your money or your rank. Indeed, I am not so paltry-minded as that, Lady Penrith. I

should be just as sorry for you if you were as poor as ma and pa. But I'm afraid there's nothing I can do to help you—nor ma either. Ma is the most helpless person I know. She's just under pa's thumb. If he were to tell her to shut us all up in an attic and feed us on bread and water, she'd do it. She'd be very sorry for us, and she'd go about the house crying all day, but she'd give way to pa. She hasn't any backbone. That's what Stephen says of her, 'No backbone.' "

"Stephen is your sweetheart perhaps," speculated Sibyl.

"He wants to be, but he's not allowed. His people are only small tenant farmers, like the Martins in Miss Austen's 'Emma'—and pa and ma say I should lose caste. Of course, I don't want to lose caste, but the Maltbys are ever so much better off than we are, and live in a sweet old house, and keep a gardener, and a boy to look after the stable, and a Whitechapel cart, and have everything about them as neat as

a new pin ; and here everything is wretched, and pa is trying enough to break the spirit of the whole family.”

Sad and agitated as she was, Lady Penrith could not refrain from a faint smile at the idea of Mrs. Carpew’s daughter losing caste by marrying a farmer.

“ I don’t want to suggest disobedience, Miss Carpew, but if this Mr. Maltby is a good young man, I think your father should reconsider his decision.”

“ He is good—as good as gold ; but please don’t think I care much about him.”

“ Well, you will give me your confidence another day, perhaps, when I am happier ; and now tell me, have you never seen the gentleman who lives in those shut-off rooms ? ”

“ Never.”

“ That’s very strange. Surely he goes out into the air sometimes, if not every day.”

“ I believe he sometimes walks in the garden at the east end of the house—a walled garden,

with some high fir trees inside the wall. We can't see into it from any of our windows. No, strange as it may seem, I have never seen him. He might be the man in the iron mask for anything I know about him."

Mrs. Carpew reappeared at this moment, and informed Lady Penrith, with polite regrets, that the Vicar had left the house an hour ago, and that he had left word that he might not be home till late in the evening. He had gone to one of the furthest cottages in his parish.

"Then you think there would be no use in my waiting for him?" said Sibyl.

"No use—delightful as it is to Gertrude and me to see you here. But I hope you'll at least stop for a second cup of tea."

"Thank you, no. I have a long drive home. I am very glad to have made your acquaintance, and your daughter's. But I must see the Vicar without an hour's avoidable delay. Will you ask him to be kind enough to stop at

home to-morrow morning? I will drive here directly after breakfast."

"I am sure he'll be charmed to see you."

"And willing to grant my request, I hope. I shall think it very strange if he refuses," said Lady Penrith, with a touch of sternness.

"I think you rather overdid it, ma," said Gerty, when the visitor had been escorted to her carriage, and had driven away.

"What do you mean, Miss, by overdoing?"

"About pa and the further cottage. It's very odd if Lady Penrith didn't see him walk past the window while she was talking."

END OF VOL. II.

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